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# Virtual bodies, flying objects: the digital imaginary in contemporary martial arts films

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## Abstract

*The international success of contemporary martial arts films has stimulated critical debates and reflections on the aesthetics, politics, and economics of local/national Chinese cinemas, as well as the ideological implications of reinventing a 'traditional' genre for international audiences, against the backdrop of increasingly interpenetrable national and cultural borders brought on by the forces of globalization. This article attempts to delineate an 'extra' dimension of the martial arts film in the global context – the creation of a 'digital imaginary' that not only reinforces and supplements the more conventional modes of representation, but also enables a 'universal' frame of reference that contributes to the global currency of martial arts films. Drawing upon Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002) and *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), and Stephen Chow's *Shaolin Soccer* (2001) and *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004), it will illustrate how this digital imaginary displaces the exotic (Chinese) tradition into the familiar realm of digital media, resulting in a hybrid, multiply coded, culturally ambiguous, and therefore transnational visual medium for global consumption.*

## Keywords

martial arts  
digital technologies  
global visual culture  
transnational  
film-making

## Introduction

Ever since Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) won the best foreign-language film at the Academy Awards and the Golden Globes in 2001 (plus numerous awards in Taiwan and Hong Kong), Chinese martial arts films, and contemporary Chinese cinema as a whole, has entered a new phase in film criticism and critical discourse both within and outside academia. Topics that generate the most rigorous and intense discussions usually revolve around the changing facets of the martial arts genre and the ideological implications of a transnational, hybrid reinvention of a traditional (national) genre for cultural identity and gender representations in the context of a globalized media and visual culture, which, despite its fluidity and multiplicity, is still dominated by orientalist perceptions of China and other non-western Others. Within the Chinese film industry itself, Ang Lee's success in Hollywood has encouraged his peers on the other side of the Pacific Ocean to make their own martial arts debuts aiming for an international audience, most notably *Hero* (2002) and *House of Flying Daggers* (2004) by Zhang Yimou, and Stephen Chow's *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004), films that have helped sustain both critical and commercial interests in the martial arts genre. Two relative late-comers are *The*

1. *The Promise* was showcased at the 56th Berlin International Film Festival in February 2006 in the 'non-competition' category. As of mid-January 2006, it has grossed over 180 million yuan in mainland China alone.
2. On *Crouching Tiger* and the diasporic imagination, see Christina Klein (2004); see also Kenneth Chan (2004) on Ang Lee's cultural dilemmas and feminist possibilities in the film. Pauline Chen's review (2004) gives a balanced reading of *Hero's* problematic politics and ideological ambivalences.
3. Siu Leung Li (2001) sees the historical development of Hong Kong martial arts films as a process of the territory's 'self-invention' within the fissures of nationalism and modernity. See also Stephen Teo's account (1997) of the rise of the *wuxia* hero in Hong Kong cinema (chapter 7), and the careers of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan (chapters 8, 9).
4. For accounts of the transnational trajectory of the Hong Kong martial arts film, see Hunt (2003: 1–20) and Teo (2005).

*Promise* by the acclaimed auteur, Chen Kaige, released in the 'golden period' of December 2005 in mainland China and Hong Kong,<sup>1</sup> and *The Banquet* (2006) by Feng Xiaogang, who hitherto has been famous for the so-called *hesuipian*, light comedies with contemporary settings screened during the Chinese New Year.

On the academic front, recent scholarship on the martial arts film has yielded many fruitful results in terms of critical reflections on the aesthetics, politics, and economics of local/national Chinese cinemas, against the backdrop of increasingly interpenetrable national and cultural borders brought on by the forces of globalization.<sup>2</sup> Some critics have offered their readings of martial arts films from a longer historical perspective, tracing the genre's evolution from earlier Cantonese and Mandarin cinemas, from the careers of Bruce Lee to Jackie Chan and Jet Li from the 1970s to the present.<sup>3</sup> One can say that the surging interest in martial arts films across national and regional borders, at both the popular cultural and critical analytical levels, has generated a vast, multi-vocal discursive space that is transnational and border-crossing in nature, thus enabling further reflections on this particular genre's unique position in the reinvention of Chinese history and culture through fantasy and multiple negotiations with pre-existing and emerging modes of cultural production and reception.

This article attempts to delineate an extra dimension of the martial arts film in the global context – the creation of a 'digital imaginary' that not only reinforces and supplements the more conventional modes of representation, but also enables a universal frame of reference that contributes to the global currency of martial arts films. Drawing upon Zhang Yimou's *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers*, and Stephen Chow's *Shaolin Soccer* and *Kung Fu Hustle*, it will illustrate how this 'digital imaginary' displaces the exotic (Chinese) tradition into the familiar realm of digital technology, resulting in a hybrid, multiply coded, culturally ambiguous, and therefore transnational visual medium for global consumption.

The international circulation of martial arts films has a long historical trajectory. From the first efforts of Hong Kong's Shaw Brothers to break into the western world in the 1960s, the genre gathered a cult following in the North American and other overseas markets. When the legendary martial arts superstar, Bruce Lee, broke into the US and other western markets with *Enter the Dragon*, the term 'kung fu' (first used by Lee himself to characterize the fighting style he initiated) was used to distinguish the Hong Kong-style action cinema that emphasizes close combat and quick fist and leg movements. The historical trajectory of traditional martial arts films and Bruce Lee-style kung fu films (and the later comic kung fu genre initiated by Jackie Chan) has been well documented and discussed in various critical works.<sup>4</sup> These early arrivals on the international film scene set the stage for the genre's transformation in both their local sites of production and the transnational networks of film-making.

Against this background, my present focus is the transformation of the visual language of the martial arts film from a local cultural phenomenon to a transnational one. In this process of transformation and transmigration, cultural and socio-economic mechanisms in the local and international arenas play an important role, such as the expansion of the Hollywood 'dream

factory' into the Asian markets, and the increasing internationalization of film-making through the accelerated movement of talents, technologies, and capital across regional and national boundaries. It is beyond the scope of this essay to encompass the complex topos of the global cinematic landscape. For the purpose of my discussion, it will suffice to point out that the border-crossing activities of popular cultural products, images, and ideas facilitated by the forces of globalization have created the necessary conditions for the emergence of a new visual culture that is subject to constant adjustments, appropriations, and re-appropriations by what Yomi Braester calls 'cultural brokers' who have to find their own niches in the culture industry by means not only of their artistic talent but also their entrepreneurial skills to negotiate successful deals with local and international sponsors (Braester 2005: 550). As far as cinema is concerned, cultural brokerage is a mixed blessing, since it always involves succumbing to the demands and constraints (both commercial and ideological) of the biggest players in the field, i.e. mega-studios in Hollywood and corporate investors. I argue that, against the grain of ideological and practical constraints, their complicity with political and economic regimes of powers notwithstanding, these new martial arts films also contribute to the generation of a new visual vocabulary that distinguishes them from their predecessors, and it is through this ability to make use of, appropriate, and reinvent a hybridized, westernized form of an originally local popular tradition that these films obtain global currency in the international mainstream.

As Leon Hunt (2003: 22) points out, critical approaches to the genre usually fall into two broad categories: (1) the spectacle of the body (typical of the western critic), and (2) 'identity' and 'traditions' (typical of the Asian critic). While the western/Asian critical divide is not always so clear-cut, these two approaches in general underscore the critical and popular reception of martial arts and action films. Hunt also notes that both approaches assert different claims of authenticity, i.e. the authentic 'Chineseness' and martial arts skills of the hero on the one hand, and the authentic body as spectacle on-screen on the other. While action/motion/body as spectacle in the western cinematic tradition has had a long history since the 1950s, in action cinema in the 1990s, 'the motion of the body [...] has shifted to the stylistic tools of the cinema body' as 'games of sight and motion [that] incorporate a more literal embodiment of [...] "the frenzy of the visible"' (Ndalianis 2000). On the other hand, scholars of Hong Kong cinema have written extensively on the cultural nationalism and identity politics inherent in Bruce Lee's kung fu films, as well as references to Chinese philosophy and aesthetics in King Hu's *wuxia* (swordplay) films (Teo 1997). However, it is also important to note that the so-called spectacle of the body, or body-in-motion, in the *wuxia* and kung fu film, is always overdetermined in its signification. Siu-leung Li, for instance, remarks that kung fu's 'dilemma of representation' originates from the tensions between 'the tradition and the modern, the mimetic and the non-mimetic modes of discourses [that] are coexistent and co-extensive in the filmic imaginary', giving rise to the 'incoherence, contradictions and instabilities of its meanings in circulation' (Li 2001: 522). Tracing the trajectory of the heroic masculine body of Bruce Lee to the pensive, perplexed, and sometimes passive figure of Jet Li's Wong Feihong

5. The 'virtual camera' is a combination of computer programming and a much earlier technique, photogrammetry, developed for mapmaking. For a detailed description, see Silberman (2003).

in Tsui Hark's *Once Upon a Time in China* series and the popularity of Jackie Chan-style action films, Li sees the 'disappearance of "kung fu" and the emergence of a more universal action choreography that disseminates transnationally', i.e. the "'kung fu-action" a la *The Matrix*' (Li 2001: 537). The transition of the aesthetic of martial arts films from an emphasis on the representation of 'real' kung fu to the so-called 'wire fu' in Tsui's *Once Upon a Time in China 3* further displaces the authentic hero-body as spectacle into spectacle-as-special effects (Abbas 1997: 31–32; Hunt 2003: 45–47).

The disappearance of the martial arts film and its hero into special effects, especially computer-generated images (CGI), in the process of the genre's globalization, however, is complex but not complete. The "'kung fu-action" a la *The Matrix*' is of course making its transnational tour. Yet, neither kung fu nor *wuxia* in relatively more 'indigenous' forms has disappeared altogether: in the last five years we have witnessed a series of local and international blockbusters in these categories, from *Crouching Tiger* and *Hero* to *Shaolin Soccer* and *Kung Fu Hustle*. More importantly, the above highly selective review of critical studies on martial arts/action cinema suggests that the line between two different approaches to the martial arts film will be gradually eroded by the shifting and multiple ideological affiliations and the changing dynamics of transnational film-making. What is beginning to disappear is the authenticity of the action hero(ine) as real-life martial arts experts, and the cultural/nationalistic messages this authentic persona embodies. This disappearance is further accelerated by the use of digital technologies in the cross-cultural (re)appropriations of visual style and choreography, or what is now known as 'cyber fu'. In *The Matrix* (1999), it is the 'virtual camera' created by the Wachowski crew<sup>5</sup> that *performs* the action *for* the actors, so that it transforms the illusion of the superhero into *our* vision of cinematic reality. As a hybridized Hollywood sci-fi-cum-martial-arts action film, *The Matrix* trilogy distinguishes itself with a generous use of quotations to create a visual language that approximates, if not surpasses, the real; hence it makes no qualms about reduplicating the genre's classic moments in virtual reality by combining the choreography of Yuen Wo-ping (*Crouching Tiger*, *Kung Fu Hustle*), one of Hong Kong's best talents, and top-notch CGI personnel in North America and Europe.

The phenomenal success of Neo and *The Matrix* trilogy worldwide also opens up a new range of possibilities for the cinematic creation of the action/martial arts hero and a new form of martial arts film that draws upon a transnational visual culture the martial arts genre itself has helped to create. For one thing, the hero's authenticity as martial arts master is sidestepped by a tacit agreement between film-makers and viewers on the suspension of disbelief. This is made possible by the ubiquity of CGI and other digital technologies in everyday life, largely as the result of mutual appropriation and exchange among various digital media, e.g. martial arts films, Hollywood action films, computer games, Japanese manga and anime (Hunt 2003: 184). It is, after all, a familiarity with speed and other spectacles of virtual reality that generates expectations of the same, at least in our perceptual reality. What authenticate our experience as spectators are the virtual camera's creation of special effects as spectacle, as

the viewer is already well equipped with the necessary vocabulary to access the cinema body of the action film in the twenty-first century. This 'cinema effect' is what I call the digital imaginary that characterizes an emerging global visual culture; this digital imaginary also gives the new martial arts film its global currency that sails through the critical divide and off to the vast and uncharted territories of the 'global popular' (During, quoted in Morris 2004: 184).

In what follows, I will examine the visual properties of *The Matrix* trilogy and the recent martial arts films by Zhang Yimou (*Hero*, *Flying Daggers*) and Stephen Chow (*Shaolin Soccer*, *Kung Fu Hustle*) to explore further the ways in which a common language is promoted by digital technologies that constitute this new 'cinema body', the ultimate spectacle of our cinematic experience of martial arts films. As we shall see, while some of these visual images are rooted in the aesthetics of the more conventional martial arts film, they are aimed at creating a reality effect that is more self-referential than referential, and is more self-consciously intertextual. I choose *The Matrix* trilogy because, in my opinion, the series is representative of the kind of hybridization of visual language discussed above, and its international success and longevity as a transnational cultural product package mark a new stage in the development of a global action cinema in terms of technical/technological ingenuity, and the legitimacy it lends to the ever more fantastic, fluid, hybrid, and irreverent forms of visual representations most profitably exploited in the new martial arts film. I am fully aware of, and share, some of the critical concerns over the Hollywoodization of local cinemas and cultural forms, and the ambivalent yet patronizing attitude implied in the process. Yet, it is also possible to conceptualize today's Hollywood *not* as the absolute dominant but, rather, as a mutating, polymorphous cultural imaginary constructed and penetrated by forces both within and outside its geopolitical centre. My purpose here is to examine a new cinematic aesthetic that is integral to the emergence of a global visual culture, a field where old and new modes of representation, cultural imaginations, and ways of seeing are brought into accelerated play by the advancement in media technologies.<sup>6</sup>

6. As an industry, cinema is never innocent of the complicity with various regimes of power that determine the parameters of its existence as an art form, but this awareness also should not prevent us from appreciating cinema's creative and transformative energies in shaping modes of perception over time.

### Enter the digital real: virtual bodies and bullet time

Inside the Matrix (the name of the computer-generated world in the film), the map of programming languages is the ultimate simulacrum – or what Baudrillard (1994: 166) calls 'the map that precedes the territory' – engendered by technological remastering of the human mind. While the Matrix as simulacrum operates diegetically to rationalize and legitimize the fantastic spectacle of the body, simulacrum also operates non-diegetically as a source of fascination. Read metaphorically, the spectacular fight scenes and the perfection of the martial arts imaginary in the film exemplify the kind of transnational cultural logic of Hollywood's global matrix: download pre-existing elements from a local genre, enlist top-notch special effects personnel from around the world, and deploy local talents behind the scene (in this case the Hong Kong action choreographer, Yuen Wo-ping) to reproduce/reinvent 'signature scenes', all in the service of a filmic imaginary of a posthuman technological empire run by machines. On the other hand, this preoccupation with perfect simulacra also enables the



7. While this unity draws upon Chinese philosophy, especially Daoism and Buddhism, the screen version of the dialogue has edited out the reference in the original script. See Žizek (2001: 232, n. 18).
8. See Wong (2005: 269–86).

perfection of martial arts aesthetics through a seamless matching, or morphing, of Hong Kong-style action choreography with digital technology. The convergence of martial arts choreography and digital technology in the cinematic spectacle is most evident in the creation of virtual bodies, which refer to both human bodies as well as other inanimate objects performing intelligent actions.

To facilitate a comparative analysis within the space of this essay, I limit my scope to two aspects of the digital imaginary – virtual bodies and flying objects in bullet time – since they encompass a range of spectacular effects related to the incorporation and updating of martial arts aesthetics in digital simulacra. The terms simulacra and simulations, together with the film's investment in the problematic of simulated reality, are no doubt the trilogy's stock in trade, both at the conceptual and representational levels. These two terms also provide the key to understanding the digital aesthetic of virtual bodies and bullet time so generously applied not only in *The Matrix* trilogy, but also in martial arts films, among others, that capitalize on the global success of this new aesthetic to reinvent a local genre facing a crisis of disappearance.

### ***Virtual bodies***

In *The Matrix* and the martial arts films I discuss in this section, the operation of virtual bodies extends the possibilities of the spectacle of speed and action, thus creating an experiential space that works intertextually across different cinematic texts. In the tradition of the martial arts film, special effects have been employed to enhance the realism of stunts to attain maximum immediacy or transparency of action, as in the classic kung fu films by Bruce Lee. The increasing emphasis on special effects, a practice popularized by Tsui Hark's reinvention of the genre in the 1990s, signalled a refocusing of cinematic realism: the degree of realism is defined not only by the visual impression of a lack of mediation in the representation of the spectacular, but also by introducing some new constituents of the real itself, i.e. the aesthetic composition of combat and flight scenes as a function of the possibilities of technological *mediation* that is no longer hidden, but assumes a diegetic significance as part of the represented/narrated.

In *The Matrix*, Neo and Morpheus fight in a virtual martial arts studio after 'downloading' kung fu programs from a computer. In this sequence we see the two characters perform kung fu combat reminiscent of many classic moments of the genre: quick exchanges of fists and high kicks, weightless leaps and walking on the walls. Later on, Neo's digital body acquires unprecedented kinaesthetic abilities: he is able to dodge bullets and casually deflect the attacks of virtual agents by bending his body 90 degrees backwards on his knees at a speed that can only be made visible in slow motion images generated by the virtual camera. By downloading digitized kung fu, Neo realizes the apogee – or dream – of the *wuxia* fantasy, i.e. attaining superhuman physical dexterity through the 'unity of the body and the mind', or, to put it another way, the mind *becomes* the body.<sup>7</sup> It is, as Wong Kin-yuen suggests, the convergence of the *techne* of kung fu and digital technology that finally makes visible the ideal potentialities of the human body in the martial arts tradition.<sup>8</sup> Later on, we see Neo stop bullets, raising his palm in a manner very similar to a classic martial arts

hero using his/her *qi* (a kind of internal energy) to fend off attacking weapons or enemies. If, as Siu Leung Li remarks, the dilemma facing the kung fu master in the modern world is the awareness of the power of guns and bullets over the fist, Neo's superhero suggests the possibility of overcoming kung fu's most formidable enemy by technologizing the art of kung fu, by domesticating kung fu within the digital hyperreal as part of the *mise-en-scène*. While the use of technology, from wirework, undercranking, and editing, to CGI, has always been an integral part of martial arts films, *The Matrix* is probably the first of its kind to make the technology of simulation a *visible* presence at both the diegetic and non-diegetic levels. Neo, as well as his friends and enemies, are less humans than the effect of a computer programme, the mastery or overcoming of which becomes the ultimate goal of the characters' quest. This technological obsession with outdoing the real in representing the humanly impossible renders the authenticity of the hero-persona irrelevant to the *vision* of the (im)possible on-screen, the greatest source of visual pleasure.

Yet, like any popular cultural product disseminated globally, the digital imaginary created by *The Matrix* is also subject to the same kind of 'remediation', 'the process whereby a medium appropriates the techniques, forms, and social significance of other media and attempts to rival or refashion them in the name of the real' (Bolter and Grusin, quoted in Hunt 2003: 86–87) on its global trajectory. Being a hybrid form of multiple inflections, it has also become a source of creative adaptations, parody, and quotations that mirror the series' own. Virtual bodies abound in Stephen Chow's *Shaolin Soccer* and *Kung Fu Hustle*, and the action is sometimes so self-consciously parodic that the audience would immediately recognize the source. For instance, in *Kung Fu Hustle*, the scenes featuring the good guy(s) fighting a gang of tuxedoed villains (the Axe Gang) vividly recall Neo combating a horde of Agent Smith's clones in the now famous 'Burly Brawl'. However, Chow's two films are more complex than mere imitations. In the martial arts film tradition, the lone hero usually has to prove his virtues and credibility in scenes where he defeats a gang of attackers blocking his rightful course. One must also bear in mind that Chow's films have always been intertextual in the sense that they self-consciously refer to a long tradition of comedy and kung fu films in Cantonese cinema, and very often Chow's own works. It is within this intertextuality, the 'need for the [...] film to retain the link to the object of parody' that Srinivas locates the 'production of the local' in Chow's corpus (Srinivas 2005: 294). Ironically, when this same local tradition is absorbed into the mainstream global cinema, *Shaolin Soccer* acquires a new transnational accessibility that was not available to Chow's previous films. In fact, it was the international success of *Shaolin Soccer* that paved the way for the more self-conscious attempt in *Kung Fu Hustle* to play down context-specific Cantonese puns and gags in the dialogue in order to cater to non-local audiences.<sup>9</sup> Yet, the success of both films lies not in the aversion to, or suppression of, the local, but in making effective remediation of certain local elements that have already become a kind of freeware in the global cinematic cyberspace. On the other hand, Chow's films make explicit references to their Hollywood counterparts, resulting in a comic pastiche of styles, a formula that

9. In 2005, *Kung Fu Hustle* came away with best picture awards at the Hong Kong International Film Festival (HKIFF) and the Golden Horse Awards (Taiwan), and was showcased in the Cannes and Sundance film festivals in the same year; in China, its box office revenue (165 million RMB) was only second to *Hero*; in Hong Kong, it was the highest-grossing film of the year (HK\$60.6 m /US\$7.8 m), slightly below Chow's previous record-setter, *Shaolin Soccer* (HK\$60.7 m in 2001). Together with *Shaolin Soccer*, the film was among the few Chinese productions that topped the Japanese blockbuster charts. 'Kung Fu Hustle Shatters HK Box Office' (2005).



10. The original version was set in Shanghai in 1945. The first Cantonese adaptation was made in 1963, followed by the Shaw Brother's remake in 1973 by director Chor Yuen. For more details, see Marchetti (2005).
11. For a critical review of *Kung Fu Hustle's* multiple references to earlier Chinese films, see Gina Marchetti (2005).
12. Kung fu comics have been a popular pastime among young people in Hong Kong for decades. The reference to the comic book here also alludes to the familiar motif of the 'scared scroll', a mysterious training manual through which one will attain superhuman power.

enables the hitherto Cantonese 'king of comedy' to make a smooth crossover to the international arena.

In *Shaolin Soccer* and *Kung Fu Hustle*, Chow's parody of *The Matrix* amounts to a carnivalesque comic reversal of the cool, by presenting us with a flurry of middle-aged, floppy, out-of-shape male and female bodies made to soar, spin, swirl, and somersault, complementing Chow's more Bruce Lee-like 'Buddha's kick' and 'Buddha's palms'. An even more memorable quotation is the highway chase scene in *Kung Fu Hustle*, where Sing, a good-for-nothing hooligan, is pursued by the landlady after his plan to kill her has been exposed. Audiences who have watched *The Matrix* would not miss the humour conveyed through the visual incongruity of character and setting: the sloppy and badly beaten Sing and the burly landlady (still wearing her pyjamas and sandals, a cigarette dangling from her mouth) performing a high-speed, life-threatening chase on their imaginary motor-cycling leg-wheel. The chase sequence also borrows heavily from animation, which results in a double quotation and an indirect comment on the original. What emerges from these ingenious adaptations, or reappropriations, however, is not merely generic borrowing from a western model (which is already a hybrid form of cinematic remediation), but an aesthetic that bridges what is real, i.e. authentic martial arts tradition in the popular cultural imaginary, and what is virtual, i.e. the actualization of the fantastical potentialities within that imaginary. Whereas in *The Matrix* these potentialities have to be justified through the diegetic staging of technology as a major thematic/narrative component, in Chow's films fantasy is taken for granted, as a lived cultural tradition (Shaolin and Wudang martial arts) and cultural imagination (folklore, cartoons, and cinema). The suspension of disbelief here is complete with the authentication of the films' title key words: 'Shaolin' and 'kung fu', which allude to not only the long tradition of martial arts training in Chinese history, but also that of Chinese martial arts films, popular fiction, and cartoons that form a significant part of the local popular culture of Hong Kong and other Chinese communities. In *Kung Fu Hustle*, the central setting, a lower-class residential compound in Shanghai, is an exact replica of the same in a much earlier film, *House of 72 Tenants*, which was remade in the 1970s by the Shaw Brothers in Hong Kong.<sup>10</sup> In this regard, Chow's 'replica of a replica' intricately situates his film within the historical trajectory of Chinese cinema, in particular the bilateral traffic between Shanghai and Hong Kong.<sup>11</sup> In the film, the central character, Sing (played by Chow), acquires his secret powers as a child not from real masters, but from a kung fu comic book<sup>12</sup> procured from a vagabond peddler. His attainment of superpower and spiritual enlightenment is a process of seeing/witnessing his (cinematic) elders fight for justice. This kind of downloading martial arts can perhaps be read as a morphing of two master texts – Hollywood and the Hong Kong popular cultural imaginary – in the reconceptualization of cinematic/cybernetic kung fu.

While the ubiquitous use of CGI in these two movies transforms the sloppiest bodies into superhumans, it also redefines the ideals about the human body and its kinetic potentialities within the martial arts imaginary. Critics elsewhere have noted that the cast of ex-kung fu stars in *Kung Fu Hustle* represent a direct homage to the action cinema of the 1970s and

1980s (Yuen Wah, Yuen Qiu, and Leung Siu-long). Yet, visually, when these stars are presented on-screen our attention is drawn, ineluctably, to the *disparity* between their past and present personas, and we cannot help but feel the imprint of time on their oversized bodies, wrinkled faces, and balding heads. (This alternative star cast is a far cry from the figure of Jade Fox, played by Zheng Pei-pei, the queen of martial arts in the 1970s, in *Crouching Tiger*, who has largely stayed in shape and dignity in the film, and therefore remains an authentic emblem of the genre.) In *Kung Fu Hustle*, the nostalgic pathos of a faded aura is dispelled, at least temporarily in the context of the screen, when we see these aging heroes soar, leap, spin, and fly through buildings and obstacles in a fantasy feast of special effects and booming background sound and music reminiscent of earlier kung fu films. One could say that this kind of self-referential casting has a demystification effect, but on the other hand the mystique of kung fu is reinscribed in the film's digital remastering, or restoration, of the compromised human body and its 'unfitness' back to its ideal condition of 'fitness' that defies the tyranny of time. Kung fu, after all, is always about subjecting the body to rigorous training to attain fitness; moreover, the need to make the Chinese fit, and thus shatter the humiliating label of the 'sick man of Asia', is the most memorable message passed on from Bruce Lee's films. Although this intertextual dimension of the film is only available to Chinese audiences or those who are familiar with the genre and its history, the *visibility* of special effects, and the unpretentious exploitation of textual and intertextual incongruities in staging the fight sequences involving these characters, align them with other virtual bodies in the digital imaginary, albeit in a playful, comic vein. Virtual bodies, as it were, signify the convergence of the 'ideal' human body in action with technology that makes that ideal possible.

### ***Bullet time and virtual objects***

In short, bullet time refers to a special filming technique that captures high-speed movement from 360 degrees. It combines still photography, motion cameras and computer-generated images, and motion capture that makes 'total vision' possible. Bullet time was the name given to a visual effect by the Wachowski brothers for 'an action sequence that slowed time to a sinuous crawl and then cranked it back up to normal speed as the camera pivoted around [the action]' (Silberman 2003). As its name suggests, bullet time is created to make visible objects (such as bullets) moving at super-high speed, which is dramatized through super-slow motion.<sup>13</sup> My primary interest here is not the technical aspects of bullet time, but the visual properties of computer-generated virtual objects, animate or inanimate, and the intensification of the spectacle of speed. Here I turn to the two martial arts films by Zhang Yimou, *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers*, to illustrate this dimension of the digital imaginary. Compared to Chow's *Shaolin Soccer* and *Kung Fu Hustle*, *Hero* and *Flying Daggers* represent the other end of the spectrum, namely, the kind of art-house *wuxia* film that owes its immediate precedence to at least Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger*, if not Wong Kar-wai's *Ashes of Time* and Tsui Hark's *Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain*. Despite, or because of, their generic differences and differential critical reception, Chow's and Zhang's films offer an interesting example of

13. Bullet time, perfected and now patented by the Wachowski brothers, has been a maturing technology developed over more than two decades, and similar techniques have been used in a number of Hollywood films prior to *The Matrix* (e.g. *Blade* (1998)).

a shared digital aesthetic that has 'crossed over' the boundaries of style, narrative, and genre conventions.

Zhang's reworking of the *wuxia* fantasy follows the paths of Ang Lee, Wong Kar-wai, and Tsui Hark. Ang Lee, for example, once remarked that making *Crouching Tiger* was 'a happy irony', a 'coming together' of his dreams about China (Lee, quoted in Chan 2004: 7); Wong Kar-wai's *Ashes of Time* testifies to a similar desire for a nostalgic revision of a traditional genre with postmodernist aesthetics. As Dai Jinhua observes, action films, especially martial arts films, provide an 'imaginary space' for the negotiation of identity and resistance in turbulent times by offering imaginary relief or solutions to socio-political and existential crises. More importantly, this imaginary space is relatively adaptable to different modes of identification and adaptation in different Chinese communities (Dai 2005: 93). The international success of *Crouching Tiger* gives further proof of the fact that this imaginary space could also be extended to a transnational audience with or without a background knowledge of Chinese film or history, through a conscious translation of the local into the global in the production process. What is striking, in this regard, about Zhang's two almost consecutive films (in terms of release rather than production) is their difference-in-similarity in the use of narrative and history. Loosely defined, *Hero* is a pseudo-historical piece about a failed assassination attempt against a well-known tyrant in Chinese history, the king of Qin; whereas *Flying Daggers* is a fictional swordplay romantic tragedy set in the Tang dynasty with no specific reference to any known historical figure or event. While *Hero*'s narrative draws attention to the instability of meaning and the indeterminacy of such notions as truth, peace, and righteousness in the discourse of power, *Flying Daggers* dwells almost exclusively in the realm of individual passion and the destructiveness of jealousy and possessiveness. *Hero*'s main action begins with an assertion of the righteousness to remove evil from the world (*tianxia*, literally 'all under heaven'), ending with the abandonment of the mission and the self-surrender of the hero and his ultimate removal by the same evil power, also in the name of *tianxia*. *Flying Daggers*, on the other hand, abandons the moral high ground right from the start to tell a story of intrigues and impersonation, escape and pursuit, capture and release, culminating in a three-point stand-off of the entangled lovers in a life-or-death battle.

Despite their apparent differences, these two films are fundamentally about the tensions between individual identity and the institutions of power that impose certain codes of conduct to limit the possibility of defining one's identity. *Hero*'s dubious politics underlines the predicament of the two heroes, Broken Sword (Tony Leung) and Nameless (Jet Li), who find themselves unable to kill the king due to a shared notion of *tianxia*. However, both Broken Sword and Nameless are rather tongue-in-cheek as to whether they actually *believe* in the emperor's grand scheme for peace, or whether *tianxia* means the same thing to the one in power; at the film's most philosophically reflective level, then, it is not the emperor's charisma or eloquence or moral character, but the internalized code of morality encompassed in the concept of *tianxia* that accounts for the self-abandonment and sacrifice of Nameless and Broken Sword. In *Flying Daggers* history and politics only serve as the backdrop for the unfolding of a romantic

tragedy of love and betrayal. The star-crossed lovers, Jin (Takashi Kaneshiro), an undercover government agent, and Mei (Zhang Ziyi), a spy for an anti-government secret society, find themselves caught between their own passions and their commitment to a greater cause that demands the sacrifice of the individual.<sup>14</sup> Unlike *Hero*, this film celebrates the quest for freedom and love despite its tragic ending: Mei dies in an attempt to save Jin from the flying dagger of Leo (Andy Lau). Taken together, one can tease out a common voice of the two films: that loyalty to a 'grand mission', or to an ideology (*tianxia*), is both irrelevant and hostile to individual happiness and the search for identity and meaning. In both films, power and war are treated as absurdities that suffocate the individual.

The above digression into the thematic subtext of the two films serves to highlight the kind of translation performed by Zhang Yimou in reworking the *wuxia* as a transnational genre, not because of the by now all-too-familiar exoticism of China and Chinese history, but because of the use of visual language to encode the local within the global, and the way in which, even in the domestic markets, the global becomes the dominant code that *strategically* eclipses the more complex and understated critique of ideology to gain the green light from the Chinese authorities and win the hearts of younger Chinese audiences amidst the scorn of more politically conscious critics on the mainland (and elsewhere). In the case of *Hero*, one immediately notices an obvious translation or transplantation in the Roman-style costume of the Qin soldiers that recalls Hollywood classics (e.g. *Ben Hur*, *Gladiator*) more than Chinese historical drama. A report in Hong Kong's *South China Morning Post* shows that younger audiences in China are drawn to *Hero* because of its all-star cast and mesmerizing fight scenes, whereas critics remain sceptical of its 'meaningless plot' and perceived pro-unification rhetoric (Jen-Siu 2002). Both films exhibit potency for multiple encodings, both at the level of narrative and visual style. While *Hero* is noted for its *Rashomon*-like parallel story lines (with a difference), *Flying Daggers* plays upon impersonation, misidentification, deceit, conflict, and revelation as the central motifs. The so-called empty or meaningless plot of *Hero* and the all-time favourite tragic-romantic frame of *Flying Daggers* (something amounting to a Chinese Romeo and Juliet spy story complicated by a third party) allow for a free play of fantasy in characterization, set design, and action choreography involving what I would call a symbiotic interaction between humans and objects. First of all, the plot elements in both films are not difficult to follow, as they are focused on a few central characters and a single event/purpose leading up to a grand finale. Given the films' ambivalence (and the general audience's indifference) towards the 'deeper meanings' mentioned above, I would even venture to propose that these plot elements would only come to life when placed within the imaginary space of *wuxia*, an inherently fantastic and visually dense genre. Second, this imaginary space is further extended by the use of digital effects to create a dizzying array of fast-moving bodies and objects. Here I will refer to a few key scenes in the two films to illustrate how these virtual objects create a visual vocabulary that both enriches and detracts from the plot, to the extent that they become the centre of gravity and subject of representation.

14. Lee Hwan-yee (2005), for example, points out that the film is critical of 'any social order' that 'is in the end inimical to the desires of an individual person'.

In the memorable opening scene of *Hero*, Nameless (Jet Li) and Sky (Donnie Yan) freeze in action, facing each other in complete stillness, at the moment when the dramatic tension has already prepared the viewer for a fatal combat. What ensues is a superbly rendered mind game, in which the two characters contemplate 'what might have happened', visually presented in black-and-white. The suspension of real action and its continuation in the minds of the combatants creates a caesura in the action's momentum, inviting the viewer to participate in the *contemplation* of the imaginary action in stillness. While this contemplative mood prefigures another mind game between Nameless and the king that defines the rest of the film's narrative, it is also a means to shift the plane of perception from 'what is *seen* happening' to 'what is seen *not* happening', i.e. the materiality of the event is replaced by the visibility of the non-event, which nonetheless determines the fate of the two heroes. The mind game, the repertoire of significant non-events, reminds us of the computer program in *The Matrix* that serves as the interface between the real and the hyper-real, two conceptually different realms that ultimately collude as the story develops. Returning to the opening scene of the film, the staging of the non-event reveals not only what is not happening, but also what in reality cannot be seen – the quick flashes of thoughts within the mind. Thus, the entire sequence dramatizes the tension between the stillness of the body and the speed of mental events within the duration of stillness. At this point a time marker is introduced: the musical scores, diegetically attributed to the *gu qin* (zither) musician on the far side of the courtyard where the fight takes place, and the resonant sound of water dripping from the roofs.

In this scene, our sensory perception is tuned to the non-narrative elements: the alternate durations of silence and background sound/music, and the *mise-en-scène* of the fight. As the non-event is unfolded, these auditory and visual details take the centre stage in constructing what one critic has called 'a stylized musical performance' (Chen 2004: 41), almost a dance that resituates the fight within the realm of art. The climax of this non-event is, once again, marked by another caesura – the music ceases abruptly as the strings of the zither break, signalling a cut back to the 'real' action in colour. Sky splashes up a shield of water (not unlike the bullets in slow motion in *The Matrix*) as Nameless leaps and drives – in bullet-time motion – his sword into his opponent's chest. Instead of focusing on the fighters and their bodies, the camera closes in on the objects that stand *between* the fighters like a screen. What we see, therefore, is a screen of objects, whose 'dance' is dramatized by the orchestration of sound effects, revealed to us like a series of abstract paintings in succession. In fact, the film frequently associates martial arts with visual and performing arts. When Nameless tries to prove his ability to Broken Sword and Snow in the library, what we see is calligraphy brushes raining down from the top of the screen, as Nameless's sword accurately slices the one he is supposed to cut from end to tip into two exact halves. The climactic moment, again in slow motion, shows the brush spreading into a circle from the centre, recalling a similar pattern when Sky swirls up a water screen at the beginning of the film. At times, the camera seems to indulge in the sheer beauty of visual objects and their potential for perfection by CGI.



In the fight sequence between Flying Snow (Maggie Cheung) and Moon (Zhang Ziyi) in the forest, what first captures the viewer's attention is the magnificence of the landscape visibly touched up by CGI. Nonetheless, the golden leaves drifting in the wind, the subtle gradation of colours of forest vegetation, and the framing create a mesmerizing picture of the landscape as the subject of representation not unlike an impressionistic painting. When the fight between the two woman warriors approaches its climax, dancing leaves again form a screen, not only between the two opponents but also between the body in action and the spectator off-screen. At the end of the fight, Moon is seriously injured, and the trees in the background all turn red. The redness thus absorbs the characters, also dressed in red, into the landscape. (As we shall see, a similar technique is used in *Flying Daggers*.)

Flying objects taking precedence over the body and body-in-action is a recurrent visual motif in the film. For example, when Flying Snow and Nameless try to defend the calligraphy studio in the state of Zhao from the storms of arrows of the invading Qin army, arrows flying through an empty sky seem to take on a life of their own as a formidable force. A more dramatic objectification of a dramatic scene is Nameless's execution at the gate of the Qin court. The last shot is given exclusively to arrows stuck all over the huge, dark gate, in the middle of which is an empty space in the shape of what could have been Nameless's body shot through by arrows. (One is tempted here to compare Nameless's sacrifice with Neo's, when he surrenders his body to a fatal reprogramming by the machines, in a Christ-like gesture. Zhang's film, by emptying Nameless's body from the execution stage, is more ambivalent and sceptical of the rationale and value of this kind of heroic sacrifice.)

The digital aesthetic in *Hero* takes a further step in *House of Flying Daggers*, which is even more spectacular in its visual offerings. Probably the film's most visually dazzling scene, the Echo Game, sees Mei (Zhang Ziyi), an anti-government activist disguised as a blind courtesan, perform a miraculous dance-and-drum sequence to the promptings of Leo (Andy Lau), a local police chief. The dance, while showcasing the fluid, flexible form of the female body, is also dominated by an array of flying objects, namely the stone beads, a wine cup, swords, and the woman's silky, floating fabric. Here, martial arts is represented as dance again, accompanied diegetically by drum beats and stringed instrument music. Compared to *Hero*'s mind game, the dance scene, however, is not as significant to the thematic exposition of the film. The sheer magnificence of the dance sequence, and the subsequent sword fight between Mei and Leo in the same setting, can therefore be regarded as a visual display, a work of art in itself, only this time it is closer to a staged dance performance than abstract paintings. Throughout the sequence, Leo keeps throwing stone beads in all directions at the circle of drums, which Zhang has to hit accordingly as she dances. Several brief medium-shots show Leo smiling mischievously as he throws out the beads, but the camera does not indulge in his point of view, which is supposedly fixated on the dancer. Instead, the most dominant shots are those devoted to the stone beads and Mei's long, floating sleeves as they hit the drums, and a few long and medium shots of Mei leaping in mid-air and back to an arresting posture.



(a)



(b)



(c)

*Figure 1: Leo repeating the Echo Game during his reunion with Mei in the forest.*

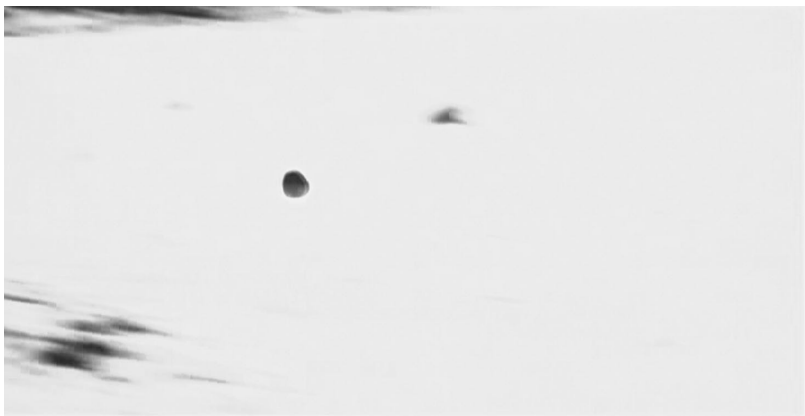
Here, bullet-time motion and virtual objects afford us almost 'total vision' of the split-second movement of the stone beads and Mei's body. More importantly, the virtual objects are arranged in a carefully designed graphic pattern that echoes with the vibrating rhythms of drums, music, and other diegetic sounds (flapping fabric and falling beads).

Given its indulgence in a visual aesthetic that privileges the sheer beauty of the scene over narration, the Echo Game is a style marker that provides a central visual motif to the subsequent action. The stone-bead motif is repeated by other virtual objects in the film: bamboos, arrows, and daggers, and finally a drop of blood. Because these objects are generally aimed at a certain target as weapons of attack, they form a consistent visual pattern in the action sequences. We follow the curving trajectory of the arrows shot by Jin (Takashi Kaneshiro) in the forest from Jin's point of view. Later on, when Jin and Mei are circumscribed by the general's guards, again we see, partially from Jin's point of view, daggers flying from behind the bushes striking down the attackers. The most impressive use of a visual motif, however, remains the Echo Game, which is repeated, with variation, twice after the opening dance sequence. The first repetition takes place in the bamboo grove in which Mei and Leo re-enact their good old times together (Figures 1a, 1b, 1c). The Echo Game is repeated for the third, and the last, time during the three-point stand-off of Jin, Mei, and Leo at the end. In this scene our attention is drawn to Leo's dagger, ready to shoot into Jin, while Mei is ready to pull the dagger out from her chest to kill Leo if he does shoot his dagger at Jin. The denouement occurs when Leo fakes a shot, setting off only a drop of blood at the tip of his dagger, and Mei throws her dagger to intercept Leo's. What we first see are two shots of Leo and Mei throwing their daggers. Cut to the drop of blood, in slow motion, moving horizontally through the screen, intercepted head-on by Mei's dagger from the opposite direction, with Jin watching in shock and disbelief in the background (Figures 2a, 2b, 2c). Visually, the fatal stand-off of the three protagonists is a variation of the Echo Game at the very beginning (and the one in the forest later on), with one player guessing the direction of the object thrown by another, and then trying to intercept or hit it by throwing another object in the same direction. Although Mei and Jin are the true lovers separated by Leo, it is, after all, Mei and Leo who are the real players of the Echo Game. It is also Leo who saves Jin and Mei from the general's agents with his daggers in the scene mentioned above. (Figures 1a, 1b, 1c, and 2a, 2b, 2c show the visual parallelism of these key episodes that mark the emotional high points of the film.) Thus, in *Flying Daggers*, virtual objects dominate the important action sequences of the film. Much more than in *Hero*, the digital aesthetic in this film is created around these objects, whereas the body of the martial arts hero(ine) is conspicuously de-emphasized. In this final scene, the play with landscape and colour – which changes from a crisp, bright day to a dreary snowstorm, exhibits the same indulgence in visual pleasure as in *Hero*.

In both *Hero* and *Flying Daggers*, virtual bodies and objects constitute the films' core visual vocabulary that both motivates the action and, more importantly, stands alone as the subject of representation itself. The two films' alignment of *wuxia* and other forms of visual art and music, which is not entirely a new discovery, is an extension of the genre's aesthetic



(a)



(b)



(c)

*Figure 2: The Echo Game repeated during the three-point stand-off in the end.*

conventions. The use of digital technologies to update and upgrade the imaginary space of *wuxia* results in a multilayered visual pattern that emphasizes not only speed but also the *staging* of special effects as the films' most spectacular spectacle.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have pointed out a new kind of 'intertextuality' that emerges from the digital imaginary of transnational martial arts films, which refer to both their predecessors in the local tradition and to the hybridized, technologically transformed visual style epitomized in *The Matrix*. The two poles – the spectacle of the (cinematic) body and the identity of the hero – are, in terms of the digital real, morphed into one. Through the conscious staging and aestheticization of digital technologies, the ideal body's potentialities in the martial arts tradition are realized; at the same time, the aesthetic possibilities of representing the body and its relations to space and objects-in-space are taken to a new horizon. In this new aesthetic, the spectacle can take the form of the idealized virtual body, or aestheticized virtual objects, all brought into existence by digital technologies. In this context, to say the spectacle is the hero is not to reiterate the predominance of homogenizing technology over human action or agency; rather, it implies an ongoing inquiry into the dynamics between technology, cultural production, and the lived and imagined realities of contemporary society. The visual magnificence of the digital real – the illusion, the 'impossible choreography' that 'looks real, but [...] just can't be' (Silberman 2003) could point toward further reflections on 'what doesn't look real, but is', both in and outside of the cinema.

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