



**No Way as Way:
Towards a Poetics of Martial Arts Cinema**

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Abstract

This essay explores the history and evolution of academic film studies, focusing in particular on the development of an admirably interdisciplinary branch of inquiry dedicated to exploring martial arts cinema. Beginning with the clash between the auteur theory and the development of a psycholinguistic model of film theory upon film studies' academic entrenchment and political engagement in the 1960s and 1970s, this essay continues past the Historical Turn in the 1970s and 1980s into the Post-Theory era in the 1990s and beyond, by which time studies of martial arts cinema, thanks in large part to the 'cultural studies intervention', began to attract scholars from various academic disciplines, most notably cultural studies. At once diagnostic and prescriptive, this essay seeks to historically contextualize the different modes of thinking that have informed past engagements with the cinema in general while also offering a polemical meta-criticism of exemplars in an effort to highlight deficiencies in the current interpretive orthodoxy informing contemporary engagements with martial arts cinema in particular. This essay endeavors to find a way to allow the larger enterprise of 'Martial Arts Studies' to compliment, rather than colonize and cannibalize, the study of martial arts cinema, and this polemic offers as a model for scholars both in and out of film studies a 'poetics of martial arts cinema' committed to dialectical, 'alterdisciplinary' scholarship.

Contributor Note

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1. Introduction

'Film is one of the most characteristic means of expression, and one of the most effective means of influence in our time. Not just individuals, but also peoples, classes, and forms of government play a part in it. The film critic of tomorrow will have to take this into account'.

Rudolf Arnheim, 1935

Nearly a century ago, still several decades before the birth of what is known today as 'academic film studies', the pioneering film theorist Rudolf Arnheim recognized as axiomatic an intersection in the cinema between culture and creation; but what today, in the 21st Century, are the ramifications of this ineluctable intersection?

After the early 20th Century battles over whether or not the new technology of the cinema qualified as art, the post-World War II rise to prominence of such film journals as *Cahiers du Cinéma* in France and *Movie* in the U.K. foregrounded efforts to chronicle the evolution of film style and to venerate the previously neglected artists of Hollywood cinema such as Howard Hawks and Alfred Hitchcock. This cinephilic quest in mid-Century film criticism saw the proliferation of such concepts as *mise-en-scène* and the auteur theory. In response to these initial preoccupations with medium specificity and authorial intentionality, the 1960s and 1970s saw theorists – embroiled in the twin academicization/politicization of the new discipline of film studies – turning to the cinema propelled by a Marxian revolutionary spirit in need of dragons to slay. Finding backing by a *corps céleste lumineux* of French intellectuals such as Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser, and Roland Barthes, the dragon against which these emancip-

atory theorists drew their mighty swords was the omnipotent 'bourgeois ideology', allegedly drawing sustenance from the cinema.

Armed with powerful concepts like 'apparatus', 'suture', 'interpellation', and 'the Gaze', scholars came to disavow the cinema (especially Hollywood cinema) as a wolf in sheep's clothing governed by hegemonic imperatives. For many scholars, this proved a call to arms; for others, this political explosion resulted in intellectual imbroglio. Much blood and ink have been spilled over the last few decades in the scores of battles that have been fought in the film studies 'Theory Wars'. Today, in a period of scholarship marked by what D.N. Rodowick has called a 'metacritical attitude', these longstanding debates that constitute the history of film studies continue to be essential in the efforts of contemporary film scholars to excavate the history of the discipline, 'reflexively examining what film theory is or has been' (Rodowick 2007: 93) on the road to determining what it can or should be. Some scholars still break out in hives at the word 'auteur' and lament the childish persistence of the 'formalists', who seem as clueless as Plato's cave dwellers in their blissfully ignorant cinephilic isolation, while others worry what will become of film studies with the author dead and films the product of a veritable ideological sausage machine.

It is at this crucial juncture in the evolution of film studies, more entwined now with cultural studies than ever before – that is to say, more interdisciplinary than ever before – that the spotlight shines on 'Martial Arts Studies', a neglected area of scholarly inquiry previously relegated to the academic dustbin. If, as Martial Arts Studies scholar and *JOMEK Journal*

editor Paul Bowman maintains, such an endeavor will at times necessitate forays into the study of the cinema, then a careful consideration of the evolution of film studies and the place martial arts films have occupied/should occupy therein has the potential to aid scholars across the humanities interested in tracing the path the martial arts has blazed through the centuries. As Bowman makes clear, engaging with disciplinary differences, as will be necessary in an endeavor such as Martial Arts Studies, requires a 'double-focus', a focus 'not just on "martial arts" but also on the question of "studies"' (Bowman 2014).

Rodowick offers the sobering reminder that 'theory has always been a difficult, unstable, and undisciplined concept' (Rodowick 2013b: xi), and he characterizes the process of 'remapping' the landscape of a given discipline like that of 'an orphaned child searching for lost relatives', often guided by 'the need to find its proper family name, to construct and reaffirm an imaginary identity of which it felt bereft' (Rodowick 2013b: 210).

At the risk of offering a one-sided, romanticized characterization of the history and evolution of film studies 'which reclaim[s] "traditions" while thoroughly transforming them in ... the image to which they aspired' (Rodowick 2013b: 210-211), this essay will attempt to traverse a few key avenues in film studies that have led to the present moment in which Martial Arts Studies presents itself as a new potential 'vanishing mediator' between film studies and other disciplines, as well as offering some possible avenues of inquiry for the purpose of expanding the study of martial arts cinema.

2. Film Studies: From Psycholinguistics to Post-Theory¹

In the Preface to the second edition of his enormously influential *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Slavoj Žižek juxtaposes Ptolemaic pseudo-revolutions versus more radical Copernican revolutions. He brings this discussion to bear on academia, wherein, when disciplines are 'in crisis', attempts are made to either change or supplement the basic disciplinary theses from within the original framework, or, in the far more radical vein, 'the basic framework itself undergoes a transformation' (Žižek 2009 [1989]: vii). Once film studies entered the academy, it came time to decide what was being sought, Ptolemization (conceding the auteurist heuristic) or a Copernican revolution (signaling the 'death of the author' and looking to establish new coordinates).

¹ What follows in this section is neither an in-depth theoretical genealogy nor a comprehensive exegesis of all of the complex theories formulated by all of the formidable thinkers that have contributed to the extraordinarily variegated landscape of film studies. Rather, what follows is a brief sketch of merely the most dominant tendencies of early academic film theory (known variously as 'Grand Theory', 'Screen Theory', '1970s Theory', or simply 'Theory') and the avenues charted by the polemical reactionary movement known as Post-Theory. For a more comprehensive historical account of the development and evolution of academic film studies, see Dudley Andrew (2009); for more extensive genealogies of film theory, see Rodowick (1988, 2013b); for more thorough examinations specifically of the period from Theory to Post-Theory, see David Bordwell (Bordwell and Carroll 1996) and Rodowick (2007); for more thorough examinations specifically of 1970s Theory, see Andrew Britton (2009 [1978]), Noël Carroll (1988), and Matthew Croombs (2011); and for more thorough examinations of the vicissitudes of authorship in this politico-theoretical context, see James Naremore (1990; 1999), Laurence F. Knapp (1996; 2005), and, with reference to martial arts cinema, Kyle Barrowman (2012).

Notwithstanding anomalous stalwarts, academic film studies initiated a Copernican revolution that saw the rise of film semiotics.² Stephen Prince acknowledges the difficulty of overstating the depths and long-lasting influence of the relationship between the analysis of visual narratives and structuralist/Saussurean-derived linguistic models (Prince 2009 [1993]: 87), while Rodowick is even more emphatic, stating that, 'before the discourse of signification, there [was] no "film theory"' (Rodowick 2013b: 171). Barthes was a key figure in the adoption of this paradigm for the analysis of art, with his work in *Communications* marking the 'opening volley in structuralism's attempt to promote a Saussurean-inflected semiology' (Rodowick 2013b: 132). As elucidated by Terence Hawkes, Barthes allegedly proved

first that the text [filmic or otherwise] ... does not offer an accurate picture of an unchangingly 'real' world, and second, that a reading of it is possible which can tear away the veil, reveal the signifier-signified connection as the un-innocent convention (however politically bolstered) it is, and offer a sense that [the text] remains genuinely ours to make and to remake as we please' (Hawkes 1977: 120-121).

² The model for film semiotics was established by Christian Metz (1990 [1967]) and elaborated by Peter Wollen (2013 [1969]). For extensions/modifications/critiques of this psycholinguistic paradigm, see William Rothman (2009 [1975]), Nick Browne (2009 [1975]), Gilbert Harman (2009 [1977]), Raymond Bellour (2000 [1979]), William Cadbury and Leland Poague (1982), Carroll (1988; 2003 [1996]), and Prince (2009 [1993]).

This Saussurean perspective was also endorsed by Lacanian psychoanalysis, wherein it was alleged

The human being can no longer be said to be the 'cause' or 'origin' of linguistic or cultural symbolism in the sense of creating this symbolism and reducing it to being a means for his projects as an absolute master ... One could, therefore, say that the human being is an effect of the signifier rather than its cause. (Lemaire 1977: 68)

The impact this psycholinguistic perspective had on the young field of film studies was truly Copernican. To subscribe to the antiquated notion that the film director determined the nature and meaning of the shots composed in order to tell his/her narrative was to betray an ignorance regarding the self-evident fact that the auteur is merely a puppet through whom 'ideology speaks'. In line with the perspective offered by Bowman vis-à-vis the 'cultural studies intervention', this shift in film studies was necessary (if not as fruitful as promised).

Following John Mowitt, Bowman postulates that the only way the cultural studies project could have succeeded was in its very failure (Bowman 2008: 183). By the same paradoxical token, the structural semiotic shift (while impractically removing *all* control from even the most flexible conceptualization of an author and trying to impose a relativistic linguistic template on analyses of 'film language') did serve as a useful corrective to the 'excesses' of early auteur theory. Film studies 'came into being' under the auspices of auteurism, worshipping the creative genius as the sole determiner of filmic meaning; shortly thereafter, auteurism experienced a 'return of the repressed' in the form of the semioticians who argued

'the true author of a film was either the cultural system that produced it or the viewer who invested the "text" with meaning and syntax' (Knapp 1996: 1-2). As Rodowick puts it in his recent reexamination of (among other things) film studies' linguistic heritage, semiology became 'the platform upon which the global study of filmic discourse [could] take place', even if, along the way, structural linguistics was displaced by the structural analysis of film (Rodowick 2013b: 167).

This was the impasse at which film studies was stuck as the 1970s turned to the 1980s, and what gave film studies the shot in the arm it needed to move forward was the aforementioned cultural studies intervention.³ Separated by two distinct poles of thought (one 'naïvely' concerned with form and narrative and occasionally appealing to an auteurist heuristic and another concerned with 'subject positions' and 'discourse determinism') the cultural studies intervention in film studies offered a bridge between the poles. If previous conceptualizations of the culture/creation dyad, as chronicled by David Bordwell, 'provided no satisfactory account of how social actors could criticize and resist ideology', if there was 'no room for "agency" in a framework in which ideological representation so thoroughly determined subjectivity' (Bordwell in Bordwell and Carroll 1996: 8), the new prerogative sought to alter this schema, viewing social agents

as participating in many activities. An agent's identity is accordingly constituted in and through the

³ For a more thorough account of the shift from Saussure and structural linguistics to Derrida and poststructural cultural theory (which has important ramifications for recent martial arts cinema studies in particular) see Rodowick (2013b: 89-111, 131-160).

overlap of diverse social practices. Moreover ... people are not "duped" by the Symbolic. Their subjectivity is not wholly constituted by representation; they are not always locked into a static subject position; they are much freer agents. (Bordwell in Bordwell and Carroll 1996: 10)

Additionally, a more tempered political mindset allowed for far less hostile engagements with the cinema. The hardcore Marxist perspective of the 1970s viewed 'cinematic representation chiefly as a problem that it must attack', whereas the earlier formalist and auteurist traditions were concerned with 'unlocking the power of the cinema rather than fighting against it' (McGowan 2007: 173). With the horrors of the 1970s in the rear-view mirror, the dilemma became whether to continue the project of 1970s psycholinguistic film theory, attached as it was to the 'political moment' of the Vietnam, Civil Rights, and student protests era, or whether, as suggested by an article in *Time* magazine, to leave the 1970s zeitgeist in the past as merely a 'historical pause not worth remembering' (quoted in Saunders 2009: 36). As portended by Noël Carroll, 'the dominant movements [of 1970s Theory] ... appear to have either exhausted themselves or ground to a halt. There is no telling what will happen' (Carroll 1998 [1985]: 332).

3. History/Theory/Criticism: Impediments to Martial Arts Cinema Studies

Invigorated by the cultural studies intervention, much of the work of film scholars since the 1970s has been very positive; however, there are still several zombie-like premises feeding on the brains of contemporary theorists. Those studying the cinema today, even if they

no longer support the hardcore cultural constructivism of years past, still often 'ignore cross-cultural features of cinema ... exaggerating the differences among individuals, groups, and cultures and ... avoiding inquiry into the areas of convergence' (Bordwell in Bordwell and Carroll 1996: 13-14). Also troubling is the preference for 'top-down inquiry', fueled by the idea that no film analysis is valid 'unless anchored in a highly explicit theory of society and the subject' (Bordwell in Bordwell and Carroll 1996: 19). As it relates to studies of martial arts cinema, these parasitic holdovers have already proven a tremendous hindrance. Indeed, the very category 'martial arts cinema' is often restricted to films made in Hong Kong, and this restricted even further to focusing largely on the films made by the Shaw Brothers and Golden Harvest in the 1960s through the 1980s. Originally, as part of the 'Historical Turn' in film studies,⁴ scholarship on martial arts cinema was deeply concerned with charting the historical evolution of the genre from literature to theater and eventually to film, as well as identifying formal and thematic specificity/consistency.⁵ Since those early efforts, after which martial arts cinema began evolving more rapidly than ever before and became a truly global phenomenon, historical accounts of martial arts cinema have been regrettably slim.⁶

If the emergent field of Martial Arts Studies is to contribute to the continued

⁴ The Historical Turn in film studies in the 1970s and 1980s is exemplified by the work of Douglas Gomery (2004 [1975]; 2008 [1986]; 1992), Tino Balio (1985 [1976]; 2009 [1979]; 2009 [1987]), and Tom Gunning (1986; 2009 [1989]; 1991). For more on the Historical Turn (and Return), see Bordwell (2005).

⁵ See Verina Glaessner (1974) and Marilyn D. Mintz (1978) for heraldic examples.

⁶ Notable exceptions on this front are Leon Hunt (2003) and Stephen Teo (2009).

evolution of film studies and vice-versa, scholars will need to probe deeper into the history of martial arts cinema. Archives and universities across the globe have more research material at their disposal now than ever before; committed research into the early Chinese silent cinema era, which saw the initial popularization of martial arts cinema in the first few decades of the 20th Century, has the potential to offer enlightening perspectives on the process of generic codification for when, mid-Century, the martial arts film reemerged in the Wong-Fei Hung films. Furthermore, genre studies that emphasize not just the Chinese *wuxia* heritage but also the cross-pollination between the Hollywood Western, the Japanese Samurai film, and the Chinese martial arts film can serve to illuminate formal tendencies, narrative conventions, and thematic universalities in films as diverse as *The One-Armed Swordsman* (1967) - links to the films of Akira Kurosawa and the similarities/differences in depictions of masculinity between Kurosawa and Chang Cheh would no doubt provide an interesting juxtaposition - *Fist of Fury* (1972) - a comparative analysis between the Bruce Lee classic and the Japanese Samurai film *The Sword of Doom* (1966) carries with it the potential to bring to light many of the influences on Lee's acting as well as the psychological implications of the clash between such paradigmatic revenge narratives and martial notions of nonviolence - and *Lone Wolf McQuade* (1983) - alongside Clint Eastwood's post-classical Westerns, studying the conflation of Western and martial arts edicts evident in the Chuck Norris iconography promises fascinating insights relevant to both genres.

Additionally, speaking of the iconic Chuck Norris vehicle, *Lone Wolf McQuade* also exemplifies the potential

for analyses connecting martial arts cinema with the related cinematic tradition of the action film.⁷ As previously asserted, the term 'martial arts cinema' tends to be limited to products made in Hong Kong (hardly a surprise given the cachet non-Hollywood films have in the Western academic world due to their virtually *a priori* anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism, anti-hegemony, et al.), but what of the evolution of Hollywood action cinema from James Cagney's embryonic efforts with martial arts in *'G' Men* (1935) and *Blood on the Sun* (1945) to the hybrid martial arts/action police thrillers of the 1980s and 1990s? What generic changes resulted upon the arrivals of such icons as Chuck Norris, Jean-Claude Van Damme, and Steven Seagal? Nationalism could prove a probative heuristic for interrogating the archetype preferred by Norris, whose rugged American hero could be juxtaposed to Jackie Chan's comedic persona;⁸ gender could provide a schema for analyses of Van Damme's corpus, featuring as it does a complex blending of 'hard' and 'soft' masculinity recalling the recondite films of Chang Cheh;⁹ and a political examination of the enigmatic films of

⁷ Meaghan Morris (2004; 2005) has provided an excellent foundation for the study of the relationships between the 'local' traditions of Asian (primarily Hong Kong but also including Japan, Thailand, and India) martial arts cinema with the more 'transnational' discursive formation of action cinema.

⁸ The first steps down this path were taken by Harvey O'Brien (2012: 79), who offers a superb and largely theoretically-sound historical overview of Hollywood action cinema that includes a small discussion of the important place Norris occupies in the history of Hollywood's incorporation of martial arts.

⁹ The seeds for such an analysis were planted by Yvonne Tasker (1993: 128), who not only includes Van Damme in her analysis of 'spectacular bodies' in action and martial arts movies but whose book not insignificantly features a shirtless Van Damme as its cover image.

Seagal, especially if juxtaposed with more traditional action icons like Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger, would no doubt provide a fascinating case study of how, reminiscent of Tom Laughlin's leftist cycle of Billy Jack films (*The Born Losers* [1967], *Billy Jack* [1971], *The Trial of Billy Jack* [1974], *Billy Jack Goes to Washington* [1977]), Seagal's personal martial/spiritual perspective clashes with the Reaganite ideology typically espoused in post-Vietnam American action movies.¹⁰ And this is to say nothing of the shameful lack of aesthetic analysis. Theories of cinematography and editing, from classical concepts such as suture theory to contemporary 'piecemeal' theories such as those discussed by Bordwell (2000) and Carroll (1996 [1979]; 2003 [1996]; 2008) could be applied to studies of martial arts cinema to see if/how they are reified/subverted in both combat and non-combat sequences, while the different ways different directors/stars choose to utilize the camera and strategically edit fight sequences could potentially offer insights, beyond aesthetics and approaching pedagogy, apropos the compatibility/incompatibility of different martial arts styles with different styles of cinematography and editing.

Very few existing studies of martial arts cinema have taken any of these considerations into account,¹¹ and this can be explained by examining the depths of the institutionalization/routinization of film interpretation. Bowman astutely avers that every analytic approach, including even the

¹⁰ Such a prolegomenon is offered in Barrowman (2013a).

¹¹ Exemplary anomalies here are Bordwell (2008 [1997]; 2008 [1998]; 2000), Aaron Anderson (1998), and Hunt (2003).

most self-consciously interdisciplinary approaches, will invariably 'privilege certain dimensions and subordinate, be ignorant of, or otherwise exclude others' (Bowman 2006: 7). It is only natural that, in the academic context, 'every version of "interdisciplinarity" cannot but be led by a particular disciplinary reference' and therefore 'produce different (often utterly contradictory forms of) knowledge' (Bowman 2006: 7). On top of which, intellectual trends and institutionalization can further harden the crust around such disciplinary tendencies. In short: 'Omniscience is not possible' (Bowman 2006: 7). Conceding the impossibility of academic omniscience, the goal must be a more modest one of providing some sort of checks and balances system depending on which disciplinary umbrella a particular object of analysis falls under. For the purposes of this essay, the object under analysis is martial arts cinema, which falls under the film studies umbrella. Given the frequency these days with which film scholars are finding themselves sharing umbrellas with cultural studies scholars, a meta-criticism that explores some of the problem areas of 'traditional' film interpretation as well as of the cultural studies model can hopefully be of use to scholars in and beyond film and cultural studies seeking to analyze products of the cinema.

4. Leading by Example: Stephen Teo and Paul Bowman

In an attempt to defend Ludwig Wittgenstein from the criticisms leveled against his later philosophy by David Pole, Stanley Cavell remarked how 'criticism is always an affront, and its only justification lies in usefulness' (2002 [1969]: 46). While the section that follows offers sustained critiques of Stephen Teo

and Paul Bowman, two of the leading names in the field of Martial Arts Studies, it should be stated at the outset that the polemical attacks that follow are restricted to their writings, they do not extend to them as scholars. The critiques of these two important and influential theorists of martial arts cinema are conducted in accordance with the Žižekian logic whereby 'one has to betray the letter of Kant', or, in this case, the letter of Teo and Bowman, if one wants 'to remain faithful to (and repeat) the "spirit" of their thought' (Žižek 2012: 11). Simon Critchley argues that such an 'economy of viciousness' is both 'intellectually healthy' and has 'sharp philosophical edges' (Critchley 2007: xiv). To employ a phrase from Rodowick, such a polemical metacritical attitude highlights 'the value of being disagreeable' inasmuch as 'producing and communicating an interpretation is [a] public and social event open to conversation and debate, agreement and disagreement, which in turn may potentially transform the terms of debate ... and the nature of the epistemological and axiological commitments that have been entered into' (Rodowick 2013a: 604). What follows is thus an attempt to enact 'a kind of synthesis between past and future' (Lovejoy 2012) in the form of a metacritical look back at two groundbreaking efforts in the history of Martial Arts Studies, the usefulness of which will hopefully justify the affront to these two important scholars.

Between the two of them, Teo and Bowman each bring different skills to the table and each approach their work from different analytical vantage points. Teo is a traditional film scholar. He works from a historical and textual perspective, and the impressive force of his rhetoric is a result of his passionate, patriotic love of 'the *wuxia* tradition' coupled with an

encyclopedic knowledge of Asian film history. Bowman, on the other hand, is a cultural theorist who finds the study of cinema, which is in some sense 'produced' by particular cultures, integral to a general understanding of culture as well as individual subjectivities situated within broader (trans)cultural spheres. He works from a social and 'supratextual'¹² perspective, and his incisive insights regarding social theory and his ability to bring theoretical postulations to bear on not just the evolution of cultures but the evolution of appropriations of cultural commodities (including films) across the board are indicative of the fecundity of 'reception studies' in the analysis of cinema.

The goal in the meta-criticism that follows is not to discredit these important scholars or encourage readers/scholars to disavow their insights out of hand. Arguably the greatest impediment to academic progress is the refusal of scholars to approach their work in dialectical fashion. Academic disciplines, as Bowman shrewdly observes, are made up of 'unavoidably heterogeneous language games [tied up] in a web of disciplinary differences', with scholars content with disseminating the same alleged 'knowledge' by operating under the same 'business as usual' procedures (Bowman 2008: 177). And armed with 'Theory', appealing to deified 'Authorities', and maintaining the requisite amount of 'political correctness', the 'knowledge' produced is allegedly beyond reproach, in need of no internal or external critique; as logically put forth by Bordwell, however, 'interrogation of one's presuppositions would seem to be the

theoretical act *par excellence*, but [scholars] seldom indulge in it' (Bordwell 1989: 251). Due to the cultish nature of the endeavor, those working in the budding field of Martial Arts Studies, by contrast, admirably avoid such close-minded perspectives. In an effort to keep this spirit of open-mindedness alive, rather than allow Martial Arts Studies to be a pretense for the colonization of film studies, a conception of what Bowman terms 'alterdisciplinarity' has the potential to allow each branch of Martial Arts Studies, film studies included, to be complimented by rather than cannibalized by the others.

[Alterdisciplinarity] means necessarily using the *others'* language, in the *others'* context. It does *not* mean shouting about [perceived problems] ... solely in our own disciplinary sites and scenes, books, journals and conferences. It means, rather, engaging with the others in *their* journals too ... In a very practical sense, this will be to strike at oneself – to relinquish one's comfortable disciplinary identity, to stop 'being disciplined'. Rather than disciplined repetition, alterdisciplinary intervention requires yielding to the other discourse, the other protocols, the other language, the other scene, through a renewed emphasis on listening *to*, engaging *with*, connecting *with* the other, on other terms, in order to 'deconstruct' it where that deconstruction could count. (Bowman 2008: 188)

In sum, the goal in moving forward with an alterdisciplinary field of martial arts cinema studies that can supplement Martial Arts Studies is to produce work the merit of which other scholars, 'according to their own declared standards, values, and protocols' (Bowman 2008: 192), should ostensibly be unable to dismiss or discredit, and

¹² This term is Leland Poague's from his discussion of the influence of (post)structuralism on film interpretation (Cadbury and Poague 1982: 173-179).

instead, must 'tarry with' in the pursuit of something as reasonably close to the 'truth' as one could possibly hope to come while still adhering to what Carroll terms a 'fallibilist' position (Carroll 1996b: 323). The routinization of film interpretation, a practice favored by both film scholars as well as other academics who find occasion to engage aspects/products of the cinema, ironically highlights the continuities of interpretive *practice* regardless of any ostensible differences in interpretive *perspective*. The seductive power of the dominant interpretive orthodoxy – with its institutionally-accepted 'Authorities' and 'safe', 'politically correct' methodologies – is such that it becomes an interpretive prison house capable of incarcerating scholars as disparate as Teo and Bowman, both of whom have been sucked into the 'finalistic' vortex abhorred by Tzvetan Todorov wherein 'it is foreknowledge of the meaning to be discovered that guides the interpretation' (Todorov 1982: 254).

Teo, in a short analysis of Bruce Lee's swan song, *Enter the Dragon* (1973), approaches the film with a nationalism framework in an effort to prove why it is an inferior work when contextualized amongst Lee's other films, while Bowman approaches *Enter the Dragon* from a Barthesian/Derridean perspective, seeking to 'deconstruct' the film and lay bare its ideological functionality. Yet, conceding their perspectival differences, their 'readings' of *Enter the Dragon* both constitute symptomatic interpretations 'based upon an *a priori* codification of what [the film] must ultimately mean' (Bordwell 1989: 260). For Teo, Bruce Lee films only 'work' when Lee is critiquing the white male heteronormativity of Western (re: Hollywood) ideology, which had previously made vicious use of Asian (and all other racial) stereotypes. It is

easy to see how Teo, working from such a biased and restrictive perspective, would be unable to see *Enter the Dragon* as anything less than capitulation (if not outright prostitution), which is worth countenancing for him even if this means his ostensibly 'politically correct' perspective, which ultimately yields a startlingly racist sentiment, comes with the price that 'many of the film's nuances now go unremarked because the interpretive optic in force has virtually no way to register them' (Bordwell 1989: 260).¹³ In Bowman's view, *Enter the Dragon* does not single out and restrict Lee so as to preserve white male hegemony, as suggested by Teo, but perhaps even more frighteningly, deploys stereotypical images of various racial indices in knee-jerk fashion in corroboration of the all-powerful influence of Ideology over and above art. This 'interpretive optic' also proves deficient, the structuralist process of 'decoding' proving irrelevant since the point at which the decoding starts is already a caricatured simplification nowhere supported by the film itself and thus offering no help in better understanding anything about the specific artistic object under consideration.

What a Bruce Lee film must ultimately mean in Teo's universe is binarized: Either Lee will indulge in the hyperbolic pedestaling of his own nation or he will indulge in denationalized hyper-masculine spectacle. And as if this nationalism/narcissism binary was not restrictive enough, Teo values only the nationalism side of the coin; any points

¹³ For a lucid critique of 'relativist skepticism' that explores in greater detail the illogical, contradictory, and even racist trappings that often accompany appeals to political correctness, particularly in analyses of art, see Paul Crowther (2004).

in any of Lee's films where the ascension of Asian strength and pride is not foregrounded are deemed trivial at best and deplorable at worst. As the focus here is on *Enter the Dragon*, a closer examination of Teo's analysis reveals a thorough betrayal of his historical project coupled with an erroneous portrait of Lee's artistry strategically deployed in transparently cherry-picked fashion towards the end game of excluding *Enter the Dragon* from the canon of martial arts cinema. Operating so close-mindedly, it is far from surprising, recalling Todorov's notion of finalistic interpretation, that Teo ultimately condemns *Enter the Dragon*. After all, it is hard to win when the game is rigged.

The first point of criticism on which Teo seizes is a familiar one: Lee was 'forced to submit to the West's perception of him as a mere action hero', offering 'a clichéd characterization of the reserved, inscrutable, and humorless Oriental hero so often seen in Hollywood movies', the significance of which is nil 'beyond the purely mechanical' (Teo 1997: 117). What a 'mere Oriental action hero' is and which characterizations in films made prior to *Enter the Dragon* serve as the basis for Teo's assessment of Lee's characterization as 'clichéd' are anybody's guess. Most troubling here is how historical accuracy takes a big hit in this portion of Teo's ostensibly historical project. At no point does Teo bring up Lee's close collaboration with producers Fred Weintraub and Paul Heller and director Robert Clouse on the fashioning of the script and his characterization therein, for had he done so, he would have found his position vis-à-vis Lee's alleged forced acquiescence to a cliché beyond untenable to the point of just being wrong.

Furthermore, Teo lacks sensitivity to acting, thus failing to note the consistency and maturation in Lee's career of his playing characters of few words (perhaps inspired by his friend and martial arts pupil, Steve McQueen, a brilliantly intuitive actor and a master of nonverbal emotionality). Indeed, Lee's characterization in *Enter the Dragon* of a stoic man of action attempting to suppress internal turmoil by focusing on external duties transcends Asian stereotypes and is instead situated alongside similar characterizations from the era such as McQueen's eponymous cop in *Bullitt* (1968), Alain Delon's meticulous hitman in *Le Samouraï* (1967), Lee Marvin's double-crossed thief in *Point Blank* (1967), Charles Bronson's vengeful gunslinger in *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), and Michael Caine's embittered gangster in *Get Carter* (1971). Thus, Lee's characterization represents, in fact, the very opposite of a cliché, emblematic of what was at the time a fresh and newly developing transgeneric and even transnational archetype.¹⁴

Another contributing factor to Teo's inability to register anything of significance in Lee's characterization is discernible when he complains that it was 'a casualty of the Western filmmakers' demand for superficial decorum at the expense of character

¹⁴ This archetype has since found a home in contemporary action cinema, where it has continued to evolve in characterizations from Sylvester Stallone's haunted Vietnam veteran John Rambo in the iconic Rambo franchise (*First Blood* [1982], *Rambo: First Blood Part II* [1985], *Rambo III* [1988]) to Matt Damon's psychologically fractured CIA operative Jason Bourne in the Bourne trilogy (*The Bourne Identity* [2002], *The Bourne Supremacy* [2004], *The Bourne Ultimatum* [2007]) all the way up to Ryan Gosling's Asperger-esque wheelman in *Drive* (2011) and Tom Cruise's hardened vigilante drifter in *Jack Reacher* (2012).

interpretation' (Teo 1997: 118). Beyond the troublingly prejudicial trivialization of the artistic capabilities of 'Western filmmakers', Teo's assertion brings to light a fundamentally flawed position that distinguishes between films that allegedly solicit 'passive enjoyment' versus 'active participation', which has regrettably evolved into the present-day pejorative patronization of the 'mindless action movie'.¹⁵ Resultant is the erroneous implication that 'the matter of viewer activity depends upon the text rather than the reader', when

the real distinction to be made, a distinction upon which the validity of film criticism and study may be said to rest, is not between passive and active films but between passive and active viewers - viewers who differ not in the operation of their perceptual and other cognitive processes *per se*, but in their willingness to put those processes to vigorous use, to engage films with them, and to set representations of films against and with representations of the world in the full richness of interplay which is connoted by the notion of interpretation ... Only if that capacity for action is in some sense independent of the films we see is there any possibility [for interpretation] ... Were it absolutely true that certain film styles automatically or tyrannically invoke identical responses in every individual, then there would be no need for education and criticism. (Poague in Cadbury and Poague 1982: xvii-xviii)

Teo goes on in the remainder of his analysis to make rhetorical leaps that go *far* beyond merely stretching the bounds of credulity (Lee's 'serious demeanor' in

¹⁵ This position, along with other similar (and similarly ignorant) positions typifying the academic bias against action movies, is extensively critiqued in Barrowman (2013a).

his allegedly cardboard characterization inexplicably 'hints at a premonition of death' [Teo 1997: 118]), makes more allegedly historically-informed claims that are conspicuously anything but (astonishingly, Lee's storied and well-documented meticulously choreographed fight sequences were, according to Teo, 'improvised' [Teo 1997: 119]), and closes with what appears to be a condemnation of Lee's entire body of work (Teo mentions how 'serious' critics charge that Lee's movies do not amount to 'narrative wholes', whatever that means, and that they are 'only relevant or interesting because of the actor's presence and his skillful display of kung fu' [Teo 1997: 119]) in absence of a rejoinder that would ostensibly serve to justify his own endeavor (do martial arts films really not have any 'extra dimensions' after all?) rather than allow straw men 'serious' critics to have the last (ignorant) word.¹⁶

Bowman's work on Lee, by comparison, is a welcome breath of fresh air. In *Theorizing Bruce Lee*, Bowman dives headfirst into not just the filmography but the philosophy and posthumous international impact of Bruce Lee, in the process offering a wonderfully lucid critique of Teo's position (Bowman 2010: 126-130). Bowman's supratextual discussions are all fascinating, and even if they leave room for disagreement, so much the better for inspiring critical

¹⁶ It is worth mentioning that, in the twelve years that elapsed between his two books on martial arts cinema, Teo softened considerably on his political position regarding Lee's filmic nationalism, so much so that he was even able to concede that he had previously 'overemphasized the Chineseness factor in Lee's nationalism, not giving due concern to his transnational appeal' (Teo 2009: 77), a commendable example for all scholars to follow of interrogating one's own presuppositions à la Bordwell.

dialogue. Seeing how his project is not so much a discussion of Bruce Lee and his films as it is about the use people have made of myths and representations of/surrounding Bruce Lee, particularly in the Western context, interpretation of individual films is not a primary concern. However, in both *Theorizing Bruce Lee* and especially his more recent *Beyond Bruce Lee*, Bowman does at times indulge in interpretation for the sake of illuminating various theoretical points, and the implications are worth noting seeing as his analytic position almost immediately places him on tenuous ground. While 'politically correct' textual analysis, as evidenced by Teo, can prove problematic, 'making use' of films *ad hoc* in supratextual analysis can also prove problematic, such as when Bowman claims *Enter the Dragon* 'removed martial arts from a position of obscurity in the West and placed them within a far wider popular cultural intertext' (Bowman 2010: 138), thereby ignoring the enormous impact of Tom Laughlin's *Billy Jack* and the television series *Kung Fu* (1972-1975), both of which 'entered the intertext' before *Enter the Dragon*, priming North American audiences to embrace the coming 'Kung Fu Craze'.

This problematic ahistoricity extends beyond Bowman's indifference towards film history and also manifests in his indifference towards the evolution of film theory by way of his adherence, in both of his Bruce Lee books, to antediluvian Barthesian principles of textual analysis for the sake of 'decoding' Lee's films.¹⁷

¹⁷ As it is *Theorizing Bruce Lee* that features Bowman's most extensive coverage of *Enter the Dragon*, it is that particular text with which this critique necessarily engages. For a more thorough examination of *Beyond Bruce Lee*, which is admirably anything but indifferent to the vicissitudes of film theory, see Barrowman (2013b).

The following passage from *Theorizing Bruce Lee* on the narrative functioning of *Enter the Dragon* proves emblematic.

The structure of this cinematic text, in its plot and narrative devices, conforms to a dominant or 'readerly' mode, based as it is around hegemonically transparent, or ideologically intelligible oppositions of good/bad, hero/antihero, and the putative triumph of justice over injustice, despite the odds (or, rather, despite the numbers) being stacked against the agent of this justice. (Bowman 2010: 140)

Combined with Barthesian notions of textuality and handy Derridean 'axiomatic oppositions' (Rodowick 1988: 19), Bowman offers a typically Lévi-Straussian mythical 'reading' that subscribes to the pedestrian notion that films offer phantasmatic cathexes via resolutions of conveniently binarized conflicts, the superficiality alleged to be a sin of the film more accurately reflecting the superficiality of the 'reading' itself as merely one small and expendable piece of a larger theoretical apparatus. Paul Crowther acknowledges the undeniable fact that all analysis, by definition, 'can only articulate its object at a relatively abstract level', but he is also quick to point out that, 'when we are dealing with sensibly or imaginatively specific artifacts', such as films, 'this becomes an especially distorting factor that must be compensated for' (Crowther 2004: 366) lest all activities of filmic construction be denied their historical/aesthetic concreteness and reduced to an 'informational schematic' within the discourse of Theory (Crowther 2004: 367). The necessity for such compensation is evident with reference to Bowman's discussion of the functionality of the characters Roper (John Saxon) and

Williams (Jim Kelly), where he posits the following:

This Williams/Roper relation contains cultural and racial stereotypes which are basically black/white, promiscuity/monogamy and conscience/frivolity. The ideological terrain entered by these characters is ostensibly that encompassed by the hero/anti-hero (Bruce Lee/Han) dialectic, but Williams and Roper serve to ground that strange and exotic otherworld within an 'ideologically orthodox' Western 'symbolic order'. Within this tokenistic space, Bruce Lee is the 'positive' and more extrapolated (Asiaphiliac) component of this binary. Han is the Fu Manchu-esque (Orientalist) signifier of pure negativity. (Bowman 2010: 141)

Rather than interrogate the specificities of Saxon's and Kelly's respective characterizations, Bowman opts for what Robin Wood calls 'plausible falsification', shoving them into neat little preexisting categories in contrast to the evidence (i.e., *the film*) for the sake of his theoretical point.¹⁸ The promiscuity/monogamy binary has no actual support in their characterizations, for Roper's choosing Ahna Capri's hostess character versus Williams' choosing half a dozen prostitutes as their 'perks' for participating in the martial arts tournament is less indicative of a sense of wholesome white male monogamy that Hegemonic Hollywood is here kind enough to grant its ideological representative and more an example of Roper's gamesmanship (evident obviously in his participation in the martial arts tournament as well as his

frequently highlighted proclivity for gambling) and his single-mindedness to get what he wants and to answer to nobody but himself (again evident in his participation in the tournament but also in his interactions with Han [Shih Kien]), whereas Williams is blinded by an arrogance regarding his fighting prowess that manifests in a dangerous (and ultimately fatal) sense of invulnerability, allowing him to indulge in large sexual appetites and hubristic displays of his combative efficacy. This latter point also illuminates the insufficiency of the conscience/frivolity binary, as the presence within each character of a conscience/frivolity dialectic is precisely what makes their characters so compelling. For Williams, his frivolity in sex and fighting is not mutually exclusive apropos his conscientiousness regarding 'ghettos' and his deep commitment to racial equality and kindness to his fellow man, the matrix of qualities that contribute to his tragic death, while, for Roper, his frivolity in gambling and his sarcastic personality merely serve as a cover for a deeply conflicted sense of morality (what Han refers to as his 'sense of grandeur') that sees its realization in the motif of the 'point [he] won't go beyond' brought up by Han and foregrounded first when Han tries to recruit Roper and again when he tries to force Roper to fight Lee.

Moving on to Lee's characterization, Bowman seems to be taking a welcome step forward, leaving behind Teo's biased and inaccurate conceptualization of Lee as a subjugated signifier for ideologically-acceptable 'Asianness'. Exploring the foregrounding of a philosophical mindset and pointing out the incongruences between stereotypical representations of the 'Oriental Other' and Lee's specifically morally- and mystically-charged Shaolin avenger, Bowman goes back on himself

¹⁸ In, 'Hawks De-Wollenized', Robin Wood offers a sustained critique of Peter Wollen's (2013 [1969]) utilization of equal (and equally problematic) structuralist methods in his oblique analysis of Howard Hawks (Wood 2006 [1976]: 233-251).

by imposing a relativistic context on Lee that imprisons him in the 'Western symbolic order'. While Teo's solidarity with Lee as a proponent of positive Chinese nationalism led him to form a negative conception of the 'Western filmmakers' who had allegedly conspired to extinguish Lee's potency as an Asian warrior, Bowman is more 'objectively' attributing a Said-esque Orientalist ignorance to the filmmakers who, helpless as mere ideological puppets, allegedly favored stereotypes and racial shortcuts to more complex race/culture relations. While Bowman is right to deny the malicious intentions implied by Teo, he effectively throws the baby out with the bathwater by preempting intentionality itself à la Foucault. Bowman refuses to place *Enter the Dragon* in its proper historical context and offer research on the production process and insights into how Lee, Clouse, and original screenwriter Michael Allin organized the characters in relation to one another and to the narrative, which would have yielded very different conclusions and cast many of the characters in very different lights.¹⁹

For all of its claims of being able to 'open up' previously 'closed' 'texts', this zombie-

¹⁹ Similar to the progression evident across Teo's work, Bowman's work is far from stagnant. Comparing some of the more simplistic readings on offer in *Theorizing Bruce Lee* with the more nuanced engagements featured in *Beyond Bruce Lee* brings into focus the benefits of a more dialectical relationship between film and cultural studies. Additionally, the theoretical notion of 'cultural translation' taken up and elaborated in *Beyond Bruce Lee* is perhaps the most fecund analytical tool Bowman has used in his scholarship since *Theorizing Bruce Lee*, and the work that has resulted has provided some of the most fertile ground on which scholars between and beyond film and cultural studies can continue cultivating an understanding and appreciation of the films of martial arts cinema in general and Bruce Lee in particular.

like socio-structuralist perspective that persists in film interpretation closes off interpretation far quicker and more completely than many other models and must be modified if it is to be useful to martial arts cinema studies. In his landmark critique of such ideological analysis, Carroll argues against the consensus among scholars analyzing the cinema, the only concern for whom is 'the identification of the operation of ideology in film', that ideology is an 'omnipotent force from whose grasp escape is impossible' (Carroll 1988: 88-89), or, at its most tempered (and transparent), a grasp only theory, and *theorists*, can break.²⁰ The valorization of theory/theorists over art/artists may appear to be a victory over ideology for the dragon slayers of academia, but it is a Pyrrhic victory that benefits the hubristic scholar rather than the neglected film text, amounting to the denunciation of cinematic artistry and the cannibalization of the cinema as an art form, hardly a victory worth celebrating.

5. Conclusion: Poetic Principles

By virtue of this brief metacritical survey, hopefully some of the pitfalls of film interpretation have been sufficiently registered so as to provide warning markers for the scholars who will no doubt seek to further the enterprise of Martial Arts Studies by way of analyses of individual films. Film interpretation is the most enduring tradition in film studies, and it is not going away any time soon (nor should it). But if the goal is a deeper understanding of the impressive breadth of martial arts cinema, the current narrow interpretive scope needs to be

²⁰ For a more pragmatic approach to ideology in film, see Carroll (1996 [1993]).

widened considerably and the theoretical and interpretive methodologies that have long governed film studies need to be dialectically interrogated lest the already rock-solid orthodoxy concretize to the point of indestructibility. Thanks to the cultural studies intervention, film studies scholars learned about the dreaded traps of ideology, but in the years since, this intervention has left behind layers of 'sedimented dogma' that preclude proper theoretical activity, which, at its best, is defined by 'a commitment to using the best canons of inference and evidence available to answer the question[s] posed', the standards of which 'ought to be those of the most stringent philosophical reasoning, historical argument, and sociological, economic, and critical analysis we can find, in film studies or elsewhere' (Bordwell and Carroll 1996: xiv).

In the spirit of Bruce Lee's Jeet Kune Do, these principles do not mandate a list of acceptable authorities or rule out different methods of analysis *a priori*. These principles urge scholars, on the contrary, to approach their research projects 'using no way as way', to be more discerning and open-minded in their deployment of existing methodologies, only 'using what is useful' and 'discarding what is useless' based on rigorous historical, cultural, authorial, and generic contextualization of the specific film(s) under consideration. Bowman's observations regarding the impossibility of academic omniscience echo the remarks of Robin Wood in his seminal essay, 'Ideology, Genre, Auteur', wherein he noted how every theory from every discipline 'has, given its underlying position, its own validity - the validity being dependent upon, and restricted by, the position', with the desirability for scholars 'to be able to draw on the discoveries and particular perceptions of

each theory, each position, without committing [himself/herself] exclusively to any one' (Wood 2002 [1977]: 288). Frequently criticized for his idealism, Wood acknowledged that this critical ideal 'will not be easy to attain, and even the attempt raises all kinds of problems' (Wood 2002 [1977]: 288), but fear of encountering problems does not seem a valid reason to avoid pursuing the type of 'synthetic criticism' envisioned by Wood. Indeed, one could make the case that, if there is a single unifying goal for the inter-/alterdisciplinary endeavor of Martial Arts Studies, it is for scholars in all disciplines to strive for that synthetic ideal with the express intention of dialectically engaging these very issues of academic study.

While this essay has attempted to highlight deficiencies in the interpretive models employed by scholars like Teo and Bowman, this is not to say that their work has not been beneficial. Bowman calls his work on Bruce Lee a supplement to film studies, but in judiciously recalling past engagements with martial arts cinema in general and Lee in particular in a dialectical effort to highlight either insufficiencies in past scholars' historical and/or theoretical reasoning or to build on intriguing ideas that have yet to be fleshed out by the other scholars presently at work in the field of Martial Arts Studies, Bowman is not so much supplementing film studies as he is challenging it. If it has been the 'lowly' branches of action and martial arts cinema that have seen the greatest proliferation in the last few decades of ideological film analysis courtesy of the cultural studies intervention, it is because the hardline elitist stance of the film studies community regarding 'mindless action movies' has discouraged film scholars from seriously engaging action cinema or any of its

subsets, including martial arts cinema, unless it is with the intention of proving why no film scholars should waste their time seriously engaging such 'lowly' cinema. Some film scholars have ignored this implicit ideological initiative, but such voices have been drowned out by the volume of the anti-action rhetoric, and the overall paltriness of action scholarship has justified the desire of scholars in other disciplines to pick up film studies' slack.

In challenging film studies, however, scholars like Bowman are not the enemy. The issue of disciplinarity with which film studies has been confronted as a result of the cultural studies intervention 'is neither one of identity, nor even of convergence', but of a 'direct opposition' that can be 'conceptually assigned to a shared conviction as to what it is possible to demand' (Badiou 2000: 4) of film studies itself. Tom Gunning has cautioned scholars from turning polemical theoretical warfare into an 'obsessive and possibly necrophilic pleasure of beating a dead horse' (Gunning in Carroll 1998: xiii); instead, scholars must try to maintain the delicate interrelation between the aesthetic and narrative analysis of individual films on the one hand and the analysis of their place between various cultural discourses on the other. As Gunning asserts, 'rigorous textual analysis is vital to the social history of film', while at the same time, 'understanding film's relation to a

culture's signifying systems is necessary for insightful textual analysis' (Gunning 1991: 11). In short, as Lee sagaciously observed, 'there is no such thing as an effective segment of a totality' (Lee in Little 2001: 91).

The challenge of 'reviving the great classical controversies' from the Theory Wars of film studies lore in a fashion that neither resembles 'closed, self-engrossed altercations nor petty "debates"' and instead more closely resembles 'forceful oppositions seeking to cut straight to the *sensitive point* at which different conceptual creations separate' (Badiou 2000: 5) represents a challenge to film studies in the spirit of the great philosophical inspiration that has fueled many of the most productive intellectual investigations in the history of the discipline, and the question that remains is whether or not film studies will rise to the challenge. Reminiscent of Carroll's portent, a 'poetics of martial arts cinema' that dialectically engages its presuppositions, grounds itself in logical reasoning, supports itself through rigorous historical and cultural analysis, engages with a multitude of analytic approaches from various disciplines, and most importantly, is fueled by an appreciation of and a respect for the martial arts and the cinema, can set Martial Arts Studies off on the right track, in the process reinvigorating film studies and exemplifying committed, dialectical alterdisciplinarity across the humanities. There is no telling what will happen.

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