

CHAPTER THREE

of

# **CUTTING ACTION**

**APPRECIATING HONG KONG'S WUXIA FILMS  
THROUGH AN ANALYSIS OF CONSTRUCTIVE EDITING**

PhD Thesis  
by  
Peter J. Gravestock

Screen Studies Department  
Faculty of Education, Humanities, Law and Theology  
Flinders University  
South Australia  
2011

### 3. CHAPTER THREE

## EDITING CONCEPTS:

### TECHNIQUES OF HONG KONG'S ACTION FILM STYLE

I have previously noted Lev Kuleshov's observation that early Soviet experiments in editing prompted audiences to complain that "Segments jump after each other so quickly that it is thoroughly impossible to understand the action!" (1974: 55). This indicates how difficult it can be to control the cogency of rapid editing because the capacity for a rapid succession of shots to become a jumble of messy visual information is enormous. Yet one of the idiosyncrasies of the Hong Kong film style is the rapid editing of action. This chapter elucidates some of the key issues associated with rapid editing and how Hong Kong filmmakers have applied rapid editing techniques.

It was the study of Japanese constructive editing technique that aided Hong Kong filmmakers' development of a unique film style in which manipulation of *cogent* rapid successions of shots is a key characteristic. The chapter begins by analysing an example of a parlour trick from a Zatoichi film to highlight key rapid editing techniques and to determine the persuasive effect of constructive editing. In particular the use of the less-than-8-frame shot, the prompting reaction shot and control of the viewer's eye-movement are identified as vital means of conveying rapidly edited action. Having established issues of rapid editing it is then time to analyse key techniques that are used to construct action and the movement of bodies.

The way that the eye-line match can be used to incidentally define space is reiterated (as shown in the *Iron Monkey* example from chapter one) and that prime operator of action editing, the match-on-action cut, is analysed at length. A match-on-action cut is one whereby two shots are united by the apparently continuous movement of an object across the cut. There is only one term used to describe such a cut within the Hollywood context but within the Hong Kong film style there are a number of different types of match-on-action cut (many of which challenge the norms of continuity editing practice) and I have identified some of the foremost types of match-on-action cut.

The ideas of Edward Dmytryk, Richard D. Pepperman and Walter Murch (some of which were addressed in the introductory chapter) will help to clarify our understanding of the relationship between editing and the viewing experience as well as the generation of emotional ties to the onscreen drama. Continuity editors actually prize the viewer's engagement with the drama above graphic continuity to maintain the invisibility of a cut. By probing this apparently contradictory information, the aim of this chapter is to provide a rigorous delineation of the techniques of constructive editing that are characteristic of the Hong Kong film style. Comparison between systems also provides the necessary terminology for analysing the editing of fight sequences. Some particular terms must be mentioned before we begin. The terms 'mental hiccup' and 'mindful response' are used with some regularity within this thesis so they must be explicated here and, although these terms originate in relation to the match-on-action cut, they are applicable to other types of cut too.

Dmytryk coined the term ‘mental hiccups’ to explain the visual anomalies of a *bad* match-on-action cut (1984: 36). Pepperman further explains that a mental hiccup occurs because, either (a) the movement across the cut passes by too quickly for adequate cognitive appraisal to occur (2004: 8), or (b) the movement passes too slowly, allowing too much time for cognitive appraisal – such as when ‘an established focal point vanishes across the cut’ (2004: 16). Pepperman asserts that the first type of mental hiccup (where the movement passes too quickly) is the commonest and says that it:

is triggered when a cut - made too soon after a movement begins – doesn’t allow for an “evolution” from the quick-eye’s reflex to a *mindful response*. In other words the eye responds to the movement with quick vigilance while the conscious brain wonders, “What was that?” ’ (2004: 8, emphasis added)

So, a mental hiccup occurs when the eye falters after the cut because a matched movement cannot be adequately processed by the mind and the mindful response is denied.

Dmytryk and Pepperman’s observations of the match-on-action also yield a significant concept about the length of an appraisable shot. They both argue that a match-on-action cut must be discontinuous to have visual continuity because there is a period of time before the viewer’s mind adequately registers the incoming shot. So Dmytryk suggests an overlap of 3 to 5 frames (1984: 32), while Pepperman suggests extending an outgoing movement to provide an overlap of 2 to 3 frames (2004: 8-9). Compared with King Hu’s understanding that the mind will not register a shot that measures less-than-8-frames (Teo 1984: 34), these lengths will provide us with the tools to scrutinize the potential effect of rapid editing upon the viewer. But first the persuasive effect of constructive editing must be discussed.



## CONSTRUCTING COGNITION

### *A Japanese Persuasion*

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the Hong Kong film style was influenced by techniques used in Japanese samurai films (Lau 1996b: 204). In the early 1960s the rendition of fantastic *wuxia* action had been surpassed by the more grounded action of Japanese samurai films. The samurai of Kurosawa Akira, Hiroshi Inagaki and those of the *Zatoichi* series were providing audiences with vigorous swordplay that was not only devoid of the magical elements that had become synonymous with the cinematic artificiality of the *wuxia* film, but which were also craftily edited.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, constructive editing was vital to the Japanese *chambara* film style because it enabled characters to appear to perform audacious yet convincing feats that did not necessarily upset the diegetic framework. In particular, constructive editing was used in the *Zatoichi* films to display the extraordinary feats of the eponymous blind-swordsman whose disability made his success more astounding. To be credible, the details/the shots have to be presented in such a way that they can be quickly and easily understood. In this endeavour we have already seen that Bordwell has identified the pause-burst-pause rhythm, expressive amplification and clarity of *mise en scène* as essential components of effective constructive editing within the Hong Kong action film style (1997; 2000), but they are also evident in Japanese films. For example, in the fourth *Zatoichi* film, *Zatoichi:*

*The Fugitive* (Tokuzo Tanaka, 1963), Zatoichi (Shintaro Katsu) engages in a display of swordplay in response to a samurai's challenge. The samurai has expressed his skill by slicing a *sake* bottle in half and Zatoichi (in accordance with the pursuit of novelty) must outdo that feat. The action plays out in the following way - Zatoichi tosses a die towards a man holding a *sake* bottle [66f].



In the fastest shot of the sequence an uncluttered close-up shows the die falling into the bottle [13f].



A swift reaction shot shows that the man is astonished by this feat [20f].



The short burst of two fast shots measures a total of 33 frames (under two seconds). Then a considerably longer take of Zatoichi's face, measuring over 8 seconds, provides a meditative pause as he turns, listening. While contemplating Zatoichi's calm repose, the pause allows the viewer time to consider what she has just seen but it also generates suspense as to what Zatoichi will do next [216f].



He begins to strike and a match-on-action cut then shows him slicing through the air with his sword in a wide two-shot [111f].



Zatoichi sheathes his sword and the bottle starts to leak.

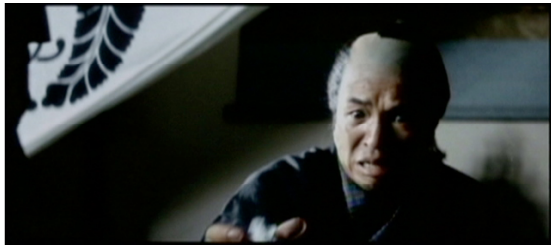


Half of the bottle slides away and drops. The next shot shows the bottle drop to the floor with the die that has also been sliced in half [29f].



Director Tokuzo's assembly of shots aims to persuade the viewer that blind Zatoichi has tossed the die into a bottle and then exceeded the samurai's challenge by cutting *both* the *sake* bottle and the die in half. In a second reaction shot, the awestruck man recoils with amplified exaggerated gestures, which helps to convey a sense of awe to

the viewer. This time the shot scale is larger to accommodate the man's movement but the shot is the same length as his previous reaction shot [20f].



Applying reason in retrospect we know that it probably took a number of takes to throw the die into the bottle and that the bottle and die were cut by the props-department not the blind swordsman, but by denying the time to visually appraise the significant details, before moving on to the next detail, the editor convinces us that Zatoichi accomplished both feats in two distinct motions.

The die-tossing/bottle-splitting example outlined above confirms Pudovkin's idea that the constructive editing of details can involve the viewer in the creative process through an observation of the remarkable (1958: 90-92), but in the Zatoichi example the editing creates a wholly *impossible* event. The persuasive effect of such constructive editing was a significant boon to Shaw Brothers whose proposed overhaul of the *wuxia* genre was intended to promote realism and eliminate fantasy. By capitalising upon its persuasive effect, *fantastic* combat could be presented with 'credible exaggeration' (Sek Kei 1994: 31). In following pages I further explain how Hong Kong filmmakers applied constructive editing techniques to feats more fantastic than those performed by Zatoichi, but in the interim there are some essential concepts and questions regarding the transmission of visual information that must be addressed.

The following section examines theoretical concepts regarding the transmission and reception of filmic information *via* rapid constructive editing. In chapter one we learned that the cognitive process induced by constructive editing has been considered by theorists to be a cumulative process because each shot delivers new detail, new information. When Hong Kong filmmakers began to adapt Japanese filmmaking techniques, they also sought to out-do their Japanese counterparts by increasing the volume of spectacle (such as the uses of fake blood shown in chapter 2) and one way of escalating the spectacle of the constructive editing technique was to use extremely fast shots. When shots are presented at speed then the mind has little opportunity to reflect upon each shot and, as a result, rapid constructive editing can have a persuasive effect because it bombards the viewer with detail. This now raises the question of tempo – the speed of a shot and of consecutive shots – and how can they be seen when they pass so quickly? How fast can a shot be before it becomes unobservable?

### *Fast Shots: On the Reception of Filmic Information*

Bordwell provides an effective summary of the cognitive process as it relates to constructive editing when he claims that ‘we infer the entire action by mentally assembling the portions of the action seen in separate shots’ (2000: 212). The mental assembly described is progressively cumulative – meaning that the viewer builds the scene from each successive shot. This insight accords with Pudovkin’s assertion that constructively edited scenes generate a progressive mental assembly of information based on the observation of unambiguous details (1958: 54-59). Hence both Pudovkin and Bordwell profess that constructive editing prompts a cumulative

cognitive process and, although his practices differ, Murch's editing principle is similar: the cut has the potential to introduce a new thought in the mind of the viewer (1992: 61). But a thought requires time to form.

The distinct guiding design principle that holds rapidly presented constructive editing together is the control of clarity. Bordwell has established that the success of a constructively edited sequence is salient staging (1997: 77-79). If the *mise-en-scène* and the framing ensure that only the pertinent details of the action are shown then there is little to confuse the viewer and the mind can more easily register what the eyes have seen. The fastest shot of the previous Zatoichi example is the 13 frame shot of the die falling into the bottle. This shot also has the simplest design of the sequence and only the pertinent objects can be seen (the die and the bottle) against the dark background.



The simple *mise en scène* enables the action to be unambiguously presented and easily recognised despite the shot measuring just over half a second. But what if the shot was even shorter? Would the eye be able to register this action?

King Hu was aware that shots could be too fast and he tested the limits of viewer cognition, saying:

There was a 'golden rule' of cinema which stated that for a human mind to register an image, a strip of film must not be less than eight frames. So I began to experiment. In *A Touch of Zen*, I put together many scenes that run less than eight frames. When I saw that some of these didn't work, I re-

edited them. At places, I would cut these scenes together, and sometimes, I would use a less than eight frame image as if accidentally. It doesn't matter if the tempo of a sequence is slow or quick, they all produce a very particular effect and are beyond description. (Teo 1984: 34)

After the cut it takes a short amount of time for the eye to register a new shot.

Dmytryk claims that from 3-5 frames into the incoming shot the viewer will become aware of the fresh perspective (1984: 32). By this margin the mind will register 5-3 frames of the tail end of an 8 frame shot, which allows very little time for the viewer to scan the shot for detail. This confirms Hu's comment that the less-than-8-frame shot is 'beyond description' because their extremely short duration of potential visibility only allows the shot to make a swift impression.

Hu was experimenting with short shots before *A Touch of Zen* (1971). The fastest shot of the fight sequences in *Come Drink With Me* (1966) is a 5 frame shot that occurs during the fourth fight sequence. It shows Jade Face Tiger (Chen Hung-lieh) cutting off Golden Swallow's hair with his sword. The precise point at which the sword swipe visibly detaches hair from Golden Swallow's head is in the fourth frame as shown.



So Hu has placed the significant moment of the action in the frame within Dmytryk's margin for the point of visible identification. But because the shot is so fast the mind can barely register the action (if at all) before the shot finishes. Although the shot contains more detail than the die-in-flight shot of the Zatoichi example, the action is

kept simple and the pivotal action is kept in the middle of the screen. So, supposing the mind does register the last two frames of the 5 frame shot the viewer will get an impression of the most significant detail of the shot – the cutting of the hair.

However this particular action is relatively indistinct within the total passage of action. This is because after the 5 frame shot Hu does not cut to a shot that provides a resolution of this action. Instead the combat continues, but Golden Swallow's hair is now loose.

In a constructively edited sequence the viewer's capacity to identify the action *during* short shots is dependent upon the clarity and position of the action within the shot *and* the content of the other shots in the sequence. In the Zatoichi example, because Zatoichi's throw in one shot effectively predetermines the falling die in the following shot the object's 'existence constancy' is maintained across the cut (Smith 2005: 203-206). The continuousness of the action helps the viewer to easily and swiftly recognise the content of that swift shot within the context of the total action being constructed. An example of how this works can be seen in Chang Cheh's reinvention of the same hair-cutting action in *One Armed Swordsman* (1967). Chang also uses a less-than-8-frame shot to add a distinct pulse to the pivotal action but he bookends that shot with longer shots that make it easily reconcilable even if it is not easily seen. A group of villains have accosted Fang Gang (Jimmy Wang Yu) and one of them demands he give them his sword--after all he doesn't need it because he only has one arm. In the first shot of this example the villain finishes talking, reaches for the sword and then Fang Gang swipes at him [239f].





A cut is then made to a 7 frame shot that has a closer shot scale. The first frame of the shot reveals the subterfuge of the filmmaker because we can see the way that the hairpiece has been applied to the sword.



But this detail is not easily discernable because it only appears during the first frame of the shot. By the fourth frame, within the range of visible identification, Fang Gang's hand has left the frame and the effect of the scalping is revealed.



The villain's head is shaved and bloody. One of the horns of his headpiece has been removed too. The third shot of this action shows Fang Gang completing his slashing motion [81f].



The exact nature of Fang Gang's scalping feat is not fully disclosed until the fourth shot of this passage of action. The 7 frame shot has been too fast for the viewer to completely comprehend the effect of Fang Gang's strike so Fang Gang brings his sword back into frame to show the villain and the viewer what he has done [68f].



By decreasing the shot scale, isolating the pertinent detail and by maintaining existence constancy from shot-to-shot, Chang has pursued the novelty of this feat to present it with more clarity than Hu.<sup>1</sup> The impression made by a less-than-8-frame shot can be reconciled when the preceding shot(s) foreshadow an action and/or the following shot(s) continue or resolve that action. Some directors have used shots that are even shorter than the 5 and 7 frame example we have just seen and in the following few pages we will see how the 3 frame shot has been applied.

In chapter 5, I examine the first fight sequence of *Come Drink With Me* in comparison with the first fight sequence of Tsui Hark's *Seven Swords*. It is also useful to make a comparison between specific shots here because the fastest shot of all the fight sequences in *Seven Swords* helps to bear out the idea that some less-than-8-frame shots cannot be properly seen and are used for stylistic effect rather than the presentation of new information.

---

<sup>1</sup> In the same way that the coin toss was relegated to the start of a series of parlour tricks in *The Twelve Gold Medallions* (Cheng Kang, 1970), Chang Cheh relegates the feat to the beginning of a series of feats played out at an inn between the principal hero and *minion* villains.

The shortest shot of the *Seven Swords* fight sequences is a 3 frame shot of a blazing fire, which occurs during the final fight sequence. The shot is too short to be seen according to Dmytryk's conception of the moment of visible identification and so its content and intent are kept very simple. Because an action will not be properly registered by the mind the 3 frame shot is used to enhance the vigour of a blazing fire. The 'flash-shot' is used to generate a distinct pulse in response to an action. Yang Yuncong (Leon Lai) brandishes his sword.



After his action, the 3 frame flash-shot is used to add a fiery pulse to the ensuing flare. The last of the 3 frames (shown below) is the frame that most completely fills the screen [3f].

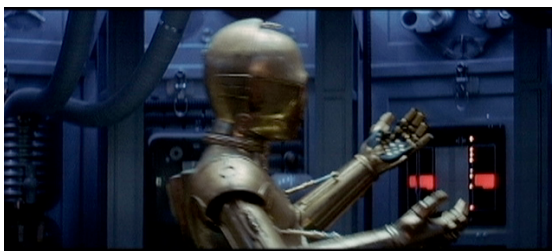


The flash shot is placed before a shot of a flaring brazier containing a more sedate fire, but the first frame of the second shot (shown below) also fills the screen to hide the cut [97f].



The flash shot is not recognizable as an independent shot but helps to give the impression that the brazier has flared up as a result of Yang's action. So, between these two shots, the match is made at the point of greatest flare. The flash serves to blind the viewer and, although the flash arrests the viewer's eye, the shot is too short for the viewer to differentiate the flash from the brazier-fire that follows it. So the *cut* between the flash and brazier goes unnoticed. Here the 3 frame shot does not exist as a visibly independent shot but is intrinsically linked to the shot that follows it. The dynamic use of this 3 frame shot serves to convey the fantastic implication is that Yang's sword emits an energy that can influence fire.

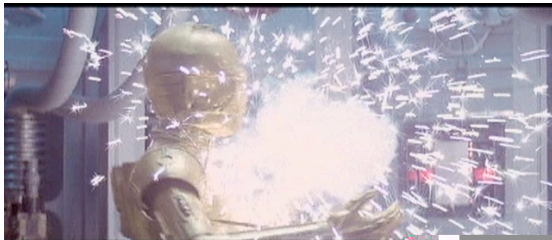
It should be noted that use of a flash to create the impression of a flaring pulse and to hide the cut is not peculiar to the Hong Kong action film. A similar cut occurs in *Star Wars: Episode V - The Empire Strikes Back* (Irvin Kershner, 1980). Here the flash conceals the use of an 8 frame shot. The purpose of the cut is practical as much as it is stylistic (to cheat the explosion of an expensive costume) but the same principles of blinding the viewer are utilised. The droid, C-3PO (Anthony Daniels), is attacked by an unseen assailant in the 8 frame shot.



A sudden flash occurs in the fourth frame. The flash creates surprise and ensures that within this 8 frame shot the last few frames of the shot will definitely be noticed by the viewer.



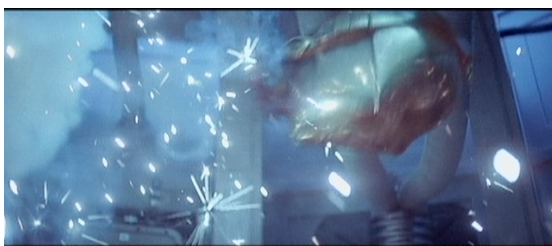
By the outgoing frame of the shot the flare has died down.



But the next shot begins with another blinding flash [17f].



Sparks fly from left to right in the space previously occupied by the droid making it look like the droid has been blasted backwards to the left of screen. Then, still in the second shot, C-3PO's head is hurled across the frame from left to right.



The flash is used to cheat the separation of the head from the body of the costume without the risk of destroying the costume in one single shot or by using one single explosion to do so. Like the *Seven Swords* example, the flashes effectively mask the cut and the use of a short shot. In this case there are two more distinct flashes, which are accompanied by the sound of two laser gunshots, which are added to maintain

continuity and to reconcile the two flashes. Yet the flashes are not easy to distinguish from each other because there are only 3 frames between the initial flash and the cut to the second flash. The blinding flashes cause the shots to appear united as a single shot that lasts for just over a second.

As the example of the 7 frame shot from *One Armed Swordsman* demonstrated, short shots can be resolved when bookended by longer shots. However an example of the application of a series of less-than-8-frame shots occurs in *Escorts Over Tiger Hills* (Wang Xinglei, 1969) that uses rapid cutting for a highly stylised impressionistic effect. In this film a series of static shots are edited sequentially and repeatedly in ever-decreasing lengths to create a dynamic, metric burst. This burst initially serves to obscure the action by bombarding the viewer with shots, but eventually the accelerated speed and repetition of the images creates a peculiar visibility of the subject swordsmen. No specific action is conveyed by the content of the shots, but the dynamic editing acts as a substitute for action. In this case the spectacular design of the edit takes precedence. The stylistic burst is intended to have a dynamic visual impact upon the viewer rather than conveying specific action. But this is a comparatively rare example of stylized metric editing.<sup>2</sup>

Although Hu has suggested that the tempo of a sequence doesn't alter the visually impressionistic effect of the less-than-8-frame shot, his concept is based on the 8-frames-or-less shot being relatively isolated within the sequence. When less-than-8-frame shots are edited *together*, in sequence, they will create a more persistent impressionistic burst. Rhythmically, pauses provide the opportunity for bursts to be

---

<sup>2</sup> I saw this film at the 2006 Hong Kong International Film Festival. Due to the film's rarity I have not been able to provide screen captures of these shots.

reconciled, but pauses are denied when bursts are persistent. Shots that are presented at great speed, will allow the viewer little opportunity for reflection, appraisal and criticism of the feat itself. Because the cognitive process is progressively cumulative there is little time to contemplate what is being seen.

The super-fast, less-than-8-frame shot is a useful tool for the filmmaker who wants to add a visual dynamic pulse to an action. However such shots must be used discerningly. Their speed restricts their application so their impact tends to be isolated. As shown by the table below, there are 5 less-than-8-frame shots in the fight sequences of *Come Drink With Me* and 3 less-than-8-frame shots in the fight sequences of *Seven Swords*. The following table outlines the fight sequences that contain such shots, how long the shots are as well as the length of shots that accompany them:

*Come Drink With Me*

Fight Sequence	Less-Than-8-Frame Shots	Timing of Assembly Showing Shot: {Before} [During] {After}
1	0	
2	0	
3	0	
4	2	{8f} [5f] {99f} / {568f} [7f] {12f}
5	1	{26f} [7f] {23f}
6	0	
7	2	{48f} [7f] {18f} [6f] {594f}

### Seven Swords

Fight Sequence	Less-Than-8-Frame Shots	Timing of Assembly Showing Shot: {Before} [During] {After}
1	0	
2	0	
3	0	
4	1	{57f} [6f] {51f}
5	1	{13f} [7f] {13f}
6	0	
7	0	
8	0	
9	1	{64f} [3f] {97f}

In each instance the burst of the less-than-8-frame shot is tempered by longer shots that bookend them. However, some of these bookend shots are still quite fast. Of the 15 bookend shots, 6 are under a second in length, which shows that the less-than-8-frame shot can provide a useful dynamic burst within fast progressions of shots. Additionally, the reader will notice that the two less-than-8-frame shots of the seventh fight sequence of *Come Drink With Me* share an intervening shot of 18 frames. In this instance both of the less-than-8-frame shots contain the experimental use of streaking light to convey the speed of Drunken Cat as he attacks his opponent, the Abbot, and then his opponent's speed as he evades Drunken Cat. Drunken Cat charges at the Abbot and his action becomes blurred by a camera movement that moves from left-to-right [48f].







The cut is made to the streaking lights that have been shot by a camera whip-panning in the same left-to-right direction [7f].



The blur of the camera movement aids the transition to this unusual shot by repeating the direction of the camera blur. The same technique is repeated when the Abbot charges in a right-to-left direction at Drunken Cat. After these symmetrical, “fast-as-light” actions both men end up on different sides of the space.



The implication of this dynamically stylised obfuscation of vision is that both men have moved so incredibly fast that they have passed right through each other. In this instance the less-than-8-frame shots are intended to make a swift impression – to dwell too long on the streaking lights would draw attention to their apparent incongruity.

The transmission of thought is regulated by the unambiguous presentation of detail. But, as will be made more explicit when examining the flight of projectile weapons in the next chapter, the clarity of an action is sometimes obscured while visibility is controlled for dynamic effect. Because I have suggested that the viewer's cognitive and emotional response can be influenced by the presentation of shots it is now pertinent to examine some concepts regarding how the viewer responds to filmic information.

### *The Perception of Motion and the Generation of Emotion*

As discussed in Chapter 1, the continuity system editor's practices are generally directed toward maintaining invisibility. The continuity system editor's work is guided by the knowledge that the viewer can adopt a critical perspective if a cut is misplaced and the shots do not gel. They are aware that the obvious use of technique can alert the viewer to a film's construction causing her to disengage from immersion in the story. Thorold Dickinson, speaking of editing practices in the 1960s, explains how a familiar technique can be disruptive: '[d]issolves are rare enough today to break the illusion and make the modern audience screen-conscious' (cited in Reisz and Millar 1968: 277).<sup>3</sup> Therefore, in the continuity system, the viewer's immersion in story is achieved by the sublimation of style to the maintenance of continuity and the progression of narrative.

One mental hiccup is enough to disengage the viewer's mind from an immersion in the diegesis. An invisible cut is one that ensures the point of transition between two

---

<sup>3</sup> Karel Reisz and Gavin Millar (1968 rev ed) *The Technique of Film Editing* London: Focal Press: 277, quoted in Perkins and Stollery 2004: 131.

consecutive shots is complementary to both shots and does not to frustrate the sense of sight - allowing the mind to resolve and readily accept the transition from one shot to another. In order to understand *how* editors try to control the eye and the mind it is necessary to analyse the various qualities of the cut – those that help it remain invisible and those that make the viewer screen conscious.

Murch's 'Rule of Six' is an index of criteria that he uses to govern his cutting decisions so as to maintain objectivity when making a cut (1992: 22-25). These criteria represent a continuity editor's concerns about keeping a cut invisible, with percentage ranking the importance of each criterion toward that goal. Murch's six criteria for an ideal cut are, as he explains them:

1. Emotion (51%). It is true to the emotion of the moment.
2. Story (22%). It advances the story.
3. Rhythm (10%). It occurs at a moment that is rhythmically interesting and 'right'.
4. Eye-trace (7%). It acknowledges what you might call 'eye-trace' - the concern with the location and movement of the audience's focus of interest at any one moment.
5. Two-dimensional plane of screen (6%). It respects the 'planarity' - the grammar of three dimensions transposed by photography to two (the question of stage-line and so on).
6. Three-dimensional space of action (4%). It respects the three-dimensional continuity of the actual space (where people are in the room and in relation to one another). (1992: 23)

These criteria, where relevant, will be analysed to discern how the viewer attends to the rapidly successive, constructively edited action of the Hong Kong film style.

These criteria contain particularly useful terms and ideas that will aid our investigation of constructive editing within the Hong Kong film style, such as the vital notion of 'eye-trace', which is the movement of the viewer's eye between points of fixation as she surveys the screen.

According to Murch's Rule of Six, if a cut stays 'true to the emotion of the moment' then it can override other discontinuities that may appear in the incoming shot (1992: 23). For Murch, emotion is at the top of the list for making a perfect cut. In fact, as a percentile on his list of criteria, it holds the governing share being ranked at 51%, enough to make a cut even if none of the other criteria are met. But Murch does not prize emotion simply because the Hollywood continuity system regularly relies upon sentimentality and sympathy to woo audiences. Rather he professes that by appealing to the viewers' emotions, along with their concern for the story, an edit can bypass their logical and critical responses because their eyes are preoccupied with gleaning plot information and character detail to advance their comprehension of the scene (1992: 24). Because of this concept experienced continuity system editors have learned to disregard visual discontinuity when an edit wholly serves the emotional thrust of a scene.

In an interview I asked editor Jacob Craycroft for his opinion regarding the maintenance of continuity and he replied that when editing *A Prairie Home Companion* (Robert Altman, 2006) he had great performances with which to work. He pointed out that such performances helped him to evade the critical attention of the viewer:

You have to follow the emotion of the scene. There's one moment when Lily Tomlin turns to Lindsay Lohan on the line about the dead father and says "Put that in your poem". It's a good moment, although she doesn't have her necklace on - you can't quite tell and you're not really focused on it - but the line was so good. (Gravestock 2006a: 93)

Craycroft elected to use footage that contained a visual aberration from the rest of the scene in favour of staying true to the performance of the actor because that performance provided a moment that served the emotional thrust of the scene and

because the viewer would, therefore, not necessarily be paying attention to the discontinuity.

Second to emotion (at 22%), Murch holds that a cut should be placed so as to advance the story. Ideally the cut should be made so that the incoming shot provides information about the developing narrative because this information feeds the viewers' interest and keeps them engaged. Like an emotional attachment, when the mind is engaged with a film's narrative content the viewer is more likely to disregard visual discontinuities. Murch says that:

if the emotion is right and the story is advanced in a unique and interesting way, the audience will tend to be unaware of (or unconcerned about) editorial problems with lower order items like rhythm, eye-trace, stage-line, spatial continuity. The general principle seems to be that satisfying the criteria of items higher on the list tends to obscure problems with items lower on the list, but not vice-versa. (1992: 24)

So Murch recommends that both emotion and story should influence cut-point selection by an overwhelming 73% while his lower order criteria are deemed more negligible when it comes to making an invisible cut. In light of the significance of these factors we might ask: is continuity over-rated? So far our investigation of the constructive editing system suggests that continuity is not a particularly important consideration. Moreover, we have learned that continuity editors recognise the greater importance of advancing narrative and emotional connection. However, at the start of a film a viewer does not instantly engage with its narrative, so emotion and story can only be increasingly relied upon to carry the cuts as the narrative progresses and the viewer's interest blossoms. First of all the audience will encounter the concerns of Murch's lower order criteria which involve the maintenance of rhythmic, graphic and spatial continuity.

One of the reasons that Ang Lee delayed the first action sequence of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* was so that western audiences could appreciate Chinese modes of behaviour and develop an interest in the story-line, if not an emotional attachment with the characters (Teo 2003a: 24-25). This tactic suits the continuity editor's purpose as emotional engagement with the story helps to carry the cuts but Hong Kong action films typically include an action sequence within minutes, even seconds of a film's start (this trait will be further discussed in chapter 5). These primary action sequences foreground a film's stylistic concerns whilst also providing narrative impetus, character motivation and so forth. In the Hong Kong action film action takes precedence, which is not to say that emotion and narrative are sidelined, but rather that these aspects of the viewer's engagement derive from the meticulous presentation of action.

It would seem that the visual and narrative challenges imparted by the Hong Kong film style might prompt the viewer to adopt a critical perspective of the film crafts, which begs the question: how do constructive editing techniques avoid the generation of mental hiccups and screen consciousness? One answer might be that by concentrating upon the trajectory of the body, other discontinuities are diminished. In later sections we will see that the actors' eyes and movements are primary attractors of viewer interest and so in the Hong Kong film style the manipulation of these primary attractors is key to the maintenance of a sense of continuousness despite potential discontinuities. In particular, there are the techniques involving the eye-line match, controlled eye-trace and a variety of match-on-action cuts. But first, how does the Hong Kong action film style encourage an emotional attachment to the narrative

through action? Bordwell has proposed that the unambiguous representations of emotion in Hong Kong films are vital for the viewer to comprehend – if not feel – the impact of action (Bordwell 2000: 244). This conjecture has more recently been buoyed by research into the brain-function of the mirror neurons, which recognise and reproduce observed physical action.

Bordwell has asserted that in the Hong Kong action film style there is a ‘strategy of expressive amplification’, a style that exaggerates the action of the actors, which has the capacity to induce a physical reaction from the receptive viewer (2000: 231-232; 1997: 86). Bordwell traces the development of this idea from the theoretical work of Sergei Eisenstein who alleged that the gestures and expressive movement of the actor could provide the stimuli to elicit a reflexive response from the audience (2000: 244). For Eisenstein, part of the requirement of the actor was that her gestures must be played expressively and that they must be inherently mimic-able so that the audience is drawn into an imitative response – albeit in a more attenuated form. Through physical repetition of the actor’s movement the viewer would be engaged in the expression of the emotion before feeling it themselves. The viewer’s imitative reaction would draw them physically into alignment with the emotional state being portrayed (Bordwell 1997: 79-87; Bordwell 2000: 243-245). Bordwell is prompted to consider whether the amplified expressions presented through action can encourage an emotional response to the drama when he says:

we might ask whether the sheerly kinetic transport achieved by the Hong Kong action style makes us more susceptible to those feelings laid out for us by the drama. Devices that might seem mere stylistic embellishment ... are central to expressive amplification, and our response to them may be heightened by our body’s engagement with the primary action. By impelling us to invest ourselves physically, the movies prepare us to emote. (2000: 244)

That the filmic representation of movement can prompt a physical response from the viewer is a compelling argument and one that appears to be confirmed by ongoing scientific research.

Editor and researcher Karen Pearlman has suggested that even tranquil performance rhythms can be translated to the viewer (2004: 112-116). Her assertion is supported by the research into the brain-function of mirror neurons, which has been described as such:

Other people's moods can be transferred through an unconscious motor imitation of their facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, and other non-verbal indicators. Mirroring causes the other person's mood to be recreated in the observer's neural patterns via so-called sociobiological choreography. In a brief moment, an angry-looking face, for example, will lead to the tensing of tiny muscles-not enough for actual mirroring but enough to reflect the angry person's facial expression ... If someone contracts the same facial muscles as another person, he or she senses the other's emotion. (Hart 2008: 91-92)

The suggestion of evidence for the connection between sight and the imitation of biological motion reinforces the claim by Eisenstein and Bordwell that the filmic representation of exaggerated movement can prompt the viewer to mimic such movement and to therefore feel an associated emotion. But this does not answer the question of whether an unfamiliar or extremely exaggerated movement is as easily recognised by the viewer. Do the viewer's mirror neurons recognise the physicality of a roundhouse-kick when they have never performed such an action? The answer to this can best be answered through scientific research of the kind conducted by Tim J. Smith (2005). I raise the question to highlight the significance of subtler techniques of viewer manipulation. Bordwell advocates that the pause-burst-pause rhythm and the strategy of expressive amplification encourage the viewer to engage with exemplary physical actions but I posit that there are additional editing techniques



used to control the viewer's response that do not require the viewer to feel aligned with the action so much as to remain in the role of an onlooker.

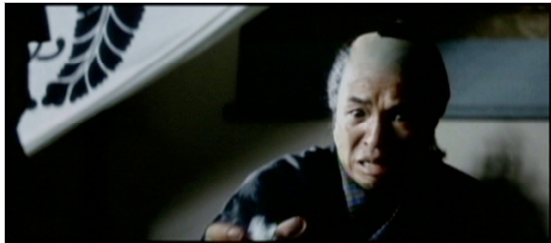
### *The Prompting Reaction Shot: A Safeguard Technique*

Carefully placed reaction shots are regularly inserted into constructively edited action sequences to encourage the viewer to react to unbelievable feats with astonishment. Should the action not be recognisable, due to speed, physical unfamiliarity or even improbability, the constructive editor has a safeguard edit that can be understood by all viewers – the cutaway to an awestruck onlooker. Perhaps my brain does not fully appreciate the functioning of the muscles used to deliver a roundhouse kick but I have reacted with surprise to the sight of amazing feats and so my mirror neurons are primed to help me appreciate, and perhaps mimic, a look of awe through an 'through an unconscious motor imitation' (Hart 2008: 91). By imitating awe, I begin to feel it due to my mirror neuron response. I might not recognise Zatoichi's strike as one that could cut a sake bottle in two – but I do recognise the reaction of the man holding the bottle.

The editor of the coin-tossing/bottle-splitting sequence from the Zatoichi example used two swift, 20 frame reaction shots within the action so they complement the relative speed of the action burst. By including these shots of the man-holding-the-bottle as the final shots of both of the bursts of action (the die toss and the bottle slice) the editor provides the viewer with a swift reaction to the action before the viewer has time to consider her own response. Firstly, at Zatoichi's first feat (tossing the die), the man is astonished.



Then he is awestruck at the second feat (splitting the bottle).



The man's expressive reactions provide a guide for the emotional response of the viewer. Just as the pursuit of novelty encourages an escalation of spectacle, these reaction shots encourage an increasing sense of amazement – from astonishment to awe – to coincide with Zatoichi's increasingly impressive feats. Even though the analytical mind may question the credibility of Zatoichi's skill the mirror neuron response will mean that viewers recognise and (to some extent) replicate the man's reactions. When presented at speed the mind has just enough time to register the reaction shot but not long enough to dwell upon it. Thus the swift reaction shot provides the viewer with a prompt as to how to react and, therefore, how to feel, even before she has time to consider her response to Zatoichi's feats.

Of course, the prompting reaction shot is not confined to martial arts parlour tricks and has been used to evoke responses to combat too. At the climax of *Sanjuro* (Kurosawa Akira, 1962) three prompting reaction shots of onlookers are placed just after the blood jets (unrealistically) from Hanbei Muroto. Each shot measures 31 frames.



Although the initial slashing and bleeding actions are exaggerated, shocking and unbelievable, the onlookers' awestruck reactions are wholly credible. They are placed after the climactic action to impress the sense of awe onto the viewer.

Notably, Han Yingjie (Hu's principal choreographer) has reported that close-ups became more common during the New Era re-vamp of the wuxia film genre (Lau 1996a: 215). Hong Kong directors used the prompting reaction shot as a technique to counter viewer incredulity towards more fantastic feats. Over time this technique has become so integral to the Hong Kong film style that there has been self-reflexive commentary on the Hong Kong film style through the use of this technique. For instance, in the Tsui Hark production *The East Is Red* (Raymond Lee Wai-Man, Tony Ching Siu-Tung, 1993) the Chinese characters do not bat an eyelid when they witness a weightless leap but a Westerner, the Dutch General, is duly astounded [18f].



*The East is Red* is the last film in the ‘Swordsman’ trilogy and is brimming with fantastic spectacle – the least of which is the weightless leap. The Westerner’s sense of wonderment becomes a signifier of cultural difference, which leads to the Dutch party’s demise when they do not heed warnings that bullets will not stop Asia the Invincible. Consequently they are killed by their own bullets in an inversion of the tragedy of the Boxer Rebellion.

The prompting reaction shot can convey more than just astonishment. In the following example from Hu’s *Dragon Gate Inn* consecutive reaction shots are used to express a progressive emotional response to the loss of a comrade who falls off a cliff. The body is not shown landing but three prompting reaction shots from members of the company provide a swift demarcation of the soldier’s demise.<sup>4</sup> The series of reaction shots from *Dragon Gate Inn* begins with a swift shot of surprise [8f]...



...then distress, as two women quickly avert their eyes from the landing, which we might assume to be rather grisly judging by their recoiling response [19f].

<sup>4</sup> These shots are reminiscent of the lion statue triptych in Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and Melanie (Tippi Hedren) at the window in Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Birds* (1963).



Lastly, there is sorrow at the soldier's death [36f].



This sequence of three-shots passes in under three seconds, which is a short amount of time to fully digest the nuance of each facial response but they do effectively deliver the overall impression of the party's anguish. These shots show an emotional progression that parallels the emotional trauma of sudden death – surprise, distress, sorrow – meanwhile Hu slows down the tempo of the total sequence at this point by increasing the time of each successive reaction shot. So, while these cutaways begin as prompting reaction shots, they also facilitate the slowing of the tempo and become a considerable rhythmic pause.

By using reaction shots to prompt a response from the viewer the constructive system shows itself to be a film style that, like Pierson's appraisal of CGI events, 'exhibits a mode of spectatorial address' (2002: 123-124). But the mode that it uses is often too fast to encourage a contemplative appraisal of the spectacle. Constructive system filmmakers favour having a deliberate impact upon the viewer rather than allowing the viewer to adopt a meditative appreciation of the spectacle. The swift prompting reaction shot is successful because it presents a swift and singular emotional reaction

that does not allow the viewer to contemplate the genuineness of the reaction.

Toward this end, Pepperman asserts that the face of an actor is of prime importance to the viewer. Pepperman gives us an editor's conception of the significant point of interest within a film – people – and breaks that down to the significant points of interest upon a person:

Our eyes will take quick and immediate notice of people. The face takes preference. The eyes take greater preference. A blink of the eyes – there is movement – is of paramount preference, as would a change in facial expression(s): shifting eyes, mouth or brow. If any of these facial expressions just barely begin, and a cut is made prior to a 'mindful response,' you'll end up with a "mental hiccup." (2004: 10)

Japanese and Hong Kong action filmmakers are aware of the necessity to maintain the integrity of the expression once it is established and so the outgoing cut is often made before the expression changes once again. Perhaps this is why Hu uses the reactions of four different characters to convey an emotional progression in the *Dragon Gate Inn* example, rather than dwelling on any one face. Because it is highly scrutinized by the viewer the face of an actor is vital for conveying an appropriate response to an event. Furthermore a change in eye-line is of supreme significance and so the actor's eyes can also be used to prompt a speculative response from the viewer. The next section examines the use of the eye-line match in the construction of filmic space.

### *Construction of Space Through Eye-Line*

Hu was aware of the command that the actor's movement, gesture and eye-line have over the viewer and he regularly showed his actors how he wanted a scene performed. Hu is remembered by Sun Jiao-wen, producer of *Raining in the Mountain* (1979) and

*Legend of the Mountain* (1979), as requiring his actors to ‘follow his every move and gesture, and act according to his wishes’ (Law 1998: 95). Cheng Pei-pei recounts Hu’s instructive directorial methods:

Each time I see *Come Drink With Me*, I feel in fact that I was his shadow. ... He also taught me to use my eyes in fighting scenes. He asked me to look at a green leaf, from one side to the other. Then, he asked me to focus on looking at candles and to glance at the light of each candle. (Law 1998: 90)

Hu’s concern with the eye-line of his actors is founded in the command that the eyes of the actor have over the interest of the viewer. Because the face of the actor is a significant point of interest to the viewer it is of little wonder that viewer speculation can be inspired and controlled by a curious eye-line. Mary Farquhar has noticed this effect in *A Touch of Zen*, saying: ‘Like Hitchcock, King Hu builds suspense through point-of-view shots, off-screen looks and restricted knowledge’ (2003: 168).

An inversion of the prompting reaction shot is the prompting eye-line match. A prompting eye-line match cut typically operates when a character in shot A looks at another position, which is off screen, but is revealed in shot B. A prompting eye-line match aids the construction of the space of action by indicating area beyond the frame - *before the cut*. It encourages viewer speculation. In Hu’s *Dragon Gate Inn* Xiao’s (Shih Chun) prompting eye-line makes the viewer wonder how a soldier’s charge will be resolved.



The next shot resolves that question by showing the soldier riddled with arrows.



So, the eye-line instigates Xiao's concern and the match then shows his reason for being concerned as the soldier is slain. The soldier falls off screen to the left and his plunge over the edge of mountain is shown in a separate shot as a dummy is substituted for the actor.



His landing is substituted with the three prompting reaction shots that were shown in the previous section.

During fight sequences eye-line matches serve to advance the storyline of the combat. The eye-line match is used to give an indication of the relative positioning of combatants as well as objects and spaces – such as weapons to be used or exits to flee through. It is also frequently used to indicate a combatant's response to a potentially debilitating injury, be it their own or another's. This action provides the briefest moment of suspense on two levels. Firstly it indicates that the character has seen, or is looking for, a change in the circumstances of the fight – be it more enemies looming, a weapon to gain the upper hand or a way to escape and so on. Secondly the eye-line match is a pause in the pause-burst-pause passage of the fight. It provides a moment of relief for the viewer to take stock of the situation *along with*



*the combatant*. Continuous action sequences can be exciting but they can also be taxing and so the eye-line match is used as a way to rejuvenate the narrative along with the attention of the audience.

The three dimensional space of action can also be aided by the eye-line match because it provides spatial definition and can give an indication of the relative positioning of combatants, objects, obstacles and portals within a sequence. However the relative position of things can change from instant to instant as distances are contracted, expanded and speed is manipulated. Once a fight sequence has begun the edit concentrates on the bodies in conflict and predominantly disregards the setting until it too can be involved in the conflict. Thus the audience's attention is concentrated by the filmmakers upon what is happening, not where it is happening. The action is like a tornado and the eye-line match is a technique that can draw the setting and its props into the swirling narrative of the fight. For example, Jade (Maggie Cheung) and Mo-yan (Briggite Lin) have been fighting over the possession of clothes in *New Dragon Gate Inn* when Jade comes to rest after leaping and looks over at Mo-yan [127f].



Mo-yan is looking back – a corresponding eye-line [28f].



Because the viewer is drawn to the eyes as a point of interest, Hong Kong filmmakers use the actor's eye-line to direct the audience's attention to significant details. Such direction encourages the viewer to anticipate what lies beyond the frame, which aids mental stimulation and interest in the trajectory of an action sequence. So Mo-yan then looks in the other direction – a prompting eye-line.



The eye-line match cut provides a brief moment of suspense because it indicates that the character is looking for, or has seen, a change in the circumstances of the situation – be it more enemies looming, a weapon to gain the upper hand or a way to escape and so on. In this case she sees more clothes hanging in an alcove [47f].



Then a series of three rapid shots between Jade Tiger and Mo-yan motivate the conflict over those clothes:

Shot 1. Jade looks from Mo-yan to the clothes and back to Mo-yan [23f].

- Shot 2. Mo-yan looks from the clothes to Jade and back to the clothes. Then she begins to leap to the left of screen [31f].
- Shot 3. Jade sees Mo-yan begin to leap then looks to the right of screen and leaps in that direction [15f].

Like the previous example from *Iron Monkey*, the characters' eye-lines indicate the respective screen directions that they will take to exit the frame. Yet, as we shall see in the next section, their directions are immediately abandoned in favour of a technique that facilitates rapid editing by manipulating focal points and keeping the viewer primed for each ensuing shot.

### *Manipulation of Eye-Trace*

Eye-trace is a phrase coined by Murch to refer to the path that the viewer's gaze traces across the screen (1992: 23). The control of eye-trace is essential for the facilitation of rapid constructively edited action. Initially I had only suspected that the manipulation of the movement of the viewer's eye was integral to the Hong Kong film style but had no evidence either way, so I asked Tsui Hark about the difficulty of staging and editing action sequences. His response confirmed my notion:

action is eye-ball movement in the movie theatre. So an editor who edits in AVID [digital editing system] using a smaller screen should always keep in mind this kind of illusion. The pace of the sequence on an editing monitor will not be similar to what we see on the big screen because the movement of a subject on the movie screen can cause a big movement of the eyes. (Gravestock and Walsh 2006: 127)

Eye-trace is one of Murch's lower order criteria in his Rule of Six but its importance to the saliency of rapid constructive editing should not be understated. To ensure that an action is not an interminable jumble of images the editor must be able to control focal points from one shot to the next and the manipulation of eye-trace is key to success in this endeavour. In the *New Dragon Gate Inn* example the rapid editing

between the two characters is complemented by the relative stillness of the actors and the fact that both figures occupy the left zone of the screen. This means that from shot to shot the eye-trace is minimal as the viewer's eye does not have to travel too far from one point of interest to another because the points of interest in either shot (the actors' eyes) nearly overlap.

Pepperman has asserted that '[c]ertain characteristics inescapably engage the eye' and that '[t]he principal eye-catcher is movement' (2004: 7). One of the strongest motivating forces in the editing of the Hong Kong constructive system fight sequence is the movement of bodies around a location. In light of Pepperman's claim we will examine how Hong Kong filmmakers have controlled eye-trace. Eye-trace occurs as the viewer watches an object move across screen. Eye-trace can also occur across a cut when the composition of shot B replaces the composition of shot A and the eye is drawn from one point of fixation to another. As we have already established, both movement and the actor's face command viewer attention.

During dialogue sequences where a shot-reverse-shot editing method is employed, the back-and-forth transition between points of interest causes the viewer's eye to swing back-and-forth across the screen, from one pair of eyes to another. So, a close up of Shu Lien (Michelle Yeoh) in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* ...



... is replaced by a close up of Li Mubai (Chow Yun-fat).



The viewer's focus swings between the two separate pairs of eyes (similarly framed and occupying the upper third screen zone) as the editor cuts back and forth.



The distance that the viewer's eye has to travel across the screen depends upon the distance between the eyes of either actor from shot to shot (as well as the size of screen she is watching). When the distance between the points of interest (in this case the actors' eyes) is further apart, the viewer's eye-trace is greater. When the points of interest are closer together the eye-trace is less.

Across a cut, eye-trace can be negated altogether. When a cut is made so that the composition of the incoming shot features a focal point that is contiguous in position to a focal point in the outgoing shot, then the viewer's eye will not be forced to move.

Continuity editor, Ralph Winters, claims to have negated eye-trace by using a travelling focal point to maintain the proximity of focal points across a cut, saying:

I once had a bunch of soldiers marching up a hill ... About halfway up the hill I cut, and they were halfway down the other side. Get the audience going in a certain way, get their eyes in a certain place, and then on the next cut their eyes are in the same place. No-one even saw the cut. The audience didn't see it. (Editors Forum 1991)

The restriction of eye-trace by the contiguous composition of focal points between consecutive shots can be used to overcome temporal and motional discontinuity.

I have noticed that the technique of over-lapping focal points can facilitate rapid editing because it does not force the eye to move around the screen. At the 2006 Hong Kong International Film Festival I sat in the front row for the festival's presentation of *The Miracle Fighters* (Yuen Woo-ping, 1982). Given the prevalence of rapid cutting in Yuen's films I had expected that by sitting so close to the screen I might have some difficulty following the passage of action throughout the film but Yuen had used a style of editing that constrained eye-trace and kept the viewer trained upon the centre of the screen. Consecutive shots were predominantly static and the action was framed so that significant movements occurred in the centre of the screen, meaning that the eye rarely had to trace a path to the edge of the frame. The centrality of focal points meant that my eye was regularly trained upon the centre of the screen, thus facilitating rapid editing without jeopardizing my appreciation of the action.

#### *Forced Eye-Trace: Maintained Screen Direction*

The focal points in the previous *Zatoichi* example do not break the frame so the viewer's eye remains concentrated upon the central zone of the screen. This means the viewer's eyes are primed to scan the information of each incoming shot as she is not required to shift her attention to the edges of the frame. In the *Zatoichi* example this is mainly because the parlour trick being showcased takes place from a seated position, but bodies in combat tend to move around the screen and there are

numerous instances when a viewer's eyes will follow a subject to the edge of the frame, forced there by the exit of a focal point.

Dmytryk explains that when a match-on-action edit maintains the screen direction of a focal point there are two ocular occurrences at the point of the cut. He uses the example of an actor exiting the frame:

First, the actor's eyes or face, usually the viewer's center of interest, leave the screen. Second, as a result, the *viewer's* eyes, which have been following the actor's movement, encounter the darkness at the screen's edge. These two actions cause a reaction - the viewer's eyes swing back toward the center of the screen, then continue to its ... edge, drawn there by the entrance of the actor in the new cut. (1984: 31)

The movement of the eye between points of fixation is known as a "saccade". Smith has tested Dmytryk's concept by studying research participants' reactions and has found that:

subjects are only able to time a saccadic eye movement to coincide with a cut when the cut occurs as the focal object is fully occluded by the screen edge (100% Exit). This anticipatory saccade results in a period of "perceptual "blindness" ... which may limit the viewer's awareness of the cut. (2005: 182)

Smith's evidence supports Dmytryk's concept. Smith also expands upon the editing concept that 'cutting when the focal-object is half occluded before the cut (50% Exit) and half-occluded after the cut (50% Entry) creates the best impression of "continuity of action" across the cut' which 'can be attributed to the sudden appearance of the focal-object *pulling* attention across the cut' (2005: 183). This effect might be partially explained by the familiarity of the technique at the present time. In the early silent era actors would fully exit the frame before entering the empty frame on the other side of the cut. Nowadays the complete exit of an actor from the frame can cause a mental hiccup because, for contemporary audiences, this

allows too much time for cognitive appraisal of the empty space. In fact, Pepperman asserts that '[i]t is best to avoid having the eyes [of the actor] ... clear the frame – at least not both' because 'the established focal point vanishes across the cut' (2004: 16). Frames that are empty of an actor (or other significant object) prompt the contemporary viewer to query the reason for the empty frames, which causes a pause in the story. If there is no satisfactory reason for the pause it will cause a mental hiccup.

A significant issue raised by Dmytryk is that when the editor controls the viewer's eye-trace she can control the way the viewer perceives, or rather, doesn't perceive the transition from one shot to another. Invisibility of the cut is maintained because, as Dmytryk points out, the viewer's physiological response precludes screen consciousness:

the viewer's eyes have been unfocused during their forced move and he has seen nothing with clarity. ... As his eyes move, sharp focus is impossible. Therefore if the cut, lasting 1/24th of a second, can be made while the viewer consumes 1/5<sup>th</sup> of a second in moving his eyes, the cut will pass unnoticed. (1984: 31)

The tactic of using the saccade to conceal the cut operates in the converse fashion to Winters' example of negligible eye-trace; however the examples given by Winters and Dmytryk explain that both minimal and maximal eye-trace can effectively guide the eyes and conceal the cut.

The control of eye-trace is essential to maintaining cogency during rapid editing. If, from shot-to-shot, focal points appear in separate screen zones, there is a risk of causing the eye to trace extreme paths across cuts – which may be too fast for the viewer's eye to keep up with if the shots are presented at speed. But the movement of



bodies across the screen is one of the dynamic elements of the *wuxia* film and subsequently many Hong Kong action filmmakers employ a method that reverses eye-trace at the cut to maintain the excitement of the action during rapid editing.

### *Forced Eye-Trace: Reversed Screen Direction*

The faster the cutting, the more incoming shots the eye has to register within a short duration. Since the eye cannot focus when moving, a series of consecutive match-on-action cuts with maintained screen direction will cause the viewer to refocus with each shot. This is because every time the subject travels across screen, the eye travels with it and then sweeps (saccades) back across screen towards the incoming subject. This causes the editor to lose 1/5<sup>th</sup> of a second to viewer blindness (Dmytryk 1984: 31). Thus the maintenance of screen direction on a match-on-action cut that travels toward, or breaks, the frame, does not facilitate rapid editing because almost 5 frames are squandered due to the saccadic movement of the eye after the cut. In light of what we have already learned about the speed of shots in Hong Kong's constructive film style, this is a considerable loss. Accordingly, rather than using the saccadic movement to conceal the cut, Hong Kong filmmakers have developed ways to move the eye back across the screen by reversing eye-trace at the point of the cut.

An example from *The East is Red* (Raymond Lee Wai-Man, Tony Ching Siu-Tung, 1993) provides definition of the reversed eye-trace technique. The viewer's eyes follow a leaping body travelling right-to-left, towards the left-edge of the frame [20f].



This is the outgoing frame.



Eye-trace is initially negated at the start of the incoming shot because the new point of fixation, the body, is located in the same screen zone as the outgoing shot. Then the viewer's eye is forced to trace a path back across screen when that body travels in the reverse direction, left-to-right [20f].



At the cut a new body is placed in the same position of the body in the previous cut. The eye is already fixed on that area of the screen and does not have to saccade back

to the centre or across the shot. The eye follows the new body in a reversed screen direction.

King Hu was familiar with this technique. Hu edited *A Touch of Zen* himself and had some freedom to experiment with editing techniques. The fight sequence in the bamboo forest shows such experimentation and upon closer analysis it is apparent that Hu recognised the significance of reversed eye-trace but did not fully exploit it because he places a cutaway at the point of reversal. During the bamboo forest scene Yang Huizhen (Xu Feng) is shown leaping and somersaulting among the bamboo stalks as she ascends to a vantage point from where she can make a deadly diving strike. The majority of these short shots feature her moving body as the focal point and so she seems to somersault around the screen because her movement (and therefore the eye-trace) is contained within the frame of each consecutive shot. However, she does exit once and at this point she takes the viewer's eye with her. This occurs when Yang's body travels from left to right and the viewer's eyes follow to the blackness at the right edge of the screen [17f].



Hu then inserts an 8 frame shot of sunlight filtered through the bamboo stalks [8f].



By the ‘golden rule’ that Hu mentioned earlier, this inserted 8 frame shot is at the limit of being properly registered by the viewer’s mind, and indeed, it only makes an impression, but this is partly to do with the incongruity of its stillness and its vacant *mise en scène* within the whole of the leaping action being performed.

The sunlit bamboo insert ever-so momentarily attracts the eye (which had travelled to the right edge of frame) back towards the centre of the screen. At this point Hu cuts to a shot of Yang as she hops in from the right of frame - heading to the left [27f].



The saccadic flickering eye of the viewer is caught by Yang’s movement and is drawn back to the edge of the same edge of the frame it had just begun to leave. The insertion of the image of sunlit bamboo seems to be a deliberately designed mental hiccup and yet the curious effect that Hu intended is unclear. Notably, the insert prevents the dual trajectories of Yang (first: left to right, and then: right to left) from immediately compromising screen direction. Had the insert not been made, Yang’s body would have travelled to the right and instantaneously reversed its trajectory at the cut. However – this is precisely a technique that is sometimes used by filmmakers who came after Hu.

Tsui Hark has regularly used the reverse eye-trace technique and in his production of Raymond Lee’s *New Dragon Gate Inn* (1992) there is a fine example of two reverse

eye-trace match-on-action cuts being used consecutively at the initiation of a rhythmic burst. This example continues the action after Mo-yan and Jade have traded eyelines and Mo-yan has leaped away toward the clothes in the alcove. In response, Jade leaps to throw darts at the clothes [15f].



In the outgoing frame, she is exiting the shot to the right of screen.



In the following shot she re-enters from the same side of the screen leaping back across the shot from left to right [19f].



The eye which followed her movement to the left of screen is *immediately* located upon her body as it returns into shot. Midway across the shot she makes a throwing motion to the right and her moving arm touches the edge of the screen in the outgoing frame.



A cut is then made to her throwing hand on the left of screen in the incoming frame and so the eye-trace is reversed once again [42f].



Unlike the example from *A Touch of Zen*, which features an intervening cutaway, these shots are linked. This type of reversed eye-trace has the effect of moving the eye's focus back-and-forth across the screen *with* the object of the viewer's attention and *without* forcing the eye to (saccade) lose focus while moving. The use of overlapping focal points from shot to shot also aids rapid editing by reducing the amount of time lost to saccadic eye movement. It reduces the time it would otherwise take for the eye to return to the point of entry across the screen should the screen direction have been maintained and, as small as that amount of time may seem to be, it has facilitated faster editing while maintaining clarity. The eye is already trained upon the new focal point and so the mind should register each new shot quite early in Dmytryk's conception of the 3-5 frame duration that it takes for recognition of a new shot (1984: 32).

Hong Kong's constructive system editors use the information that is of immediate interest to the eyes of the viewer – the actor's eye-line and movement – to

concentrate the viewer's attention upon specific screen zones. Manipulating eye-trace with movement helps the constructive system editor to overcome potential discontinuities because the viewer's attention is focused upon that movement rather than its spatial context. In the constructive system the action takes priority and all film crafts are turned toward that end while the maintenance of a continuity of space is disregarded and the 180 degree axis of action is readily and justifiably crossed to facilitate faster editing.

This section has identified three key ways that eye-trace can be manipulated: negated eye-trace, forced eye-trace with a maintained screen direction and forced eye-trace with a reversed screen direction. Although continuity editors are prepared to use the first two types of eye-trace to conceal the cut, their adherence to spatial continuity precludes the use of forced eye-trace with a reversed screen direction. However, Hong Kong action filmmakers have employed forced eye-trace with a reversed screen direction because their prioritisation of the movement of the body favours it and because their inclination to use rapid editing demands such a dynamic editing technique so as to save time and to generate excitement.

Similarly, Hong Kong action filmmakers have developed a number of different types of match-on-action cut. A match-on-action cut is one whereby two shots are joined by the sense of continuous movement of an object across the cut. Because the eye's engagement with movement can disguise the cut-point, the match-on-action cut is regularly used in continuity system action sequences. Typically this type of edit maintains screen direction but doesn't have to – as shown by the previous *New Dragon Gate Inn* example and as will be shown by examples in the next section.

When match-on-action cuts are used to join consecutive and rapid shots, as they often are in Hong Kong action films, then the saliency of the movement becomes of paramount importance so that the mind can either grasp, or become deliberately befuddled by, the trajectory of the object. The in-camera collection of footage does not necessarily assure enough coverage to allow the kind of overlap that Dmytryk and Pepperman advocate for giving the impression of continuity (1984: 32; 2004: 8-9). As a result there are a number of techniques used to imply the continuation of an action that push the idea of “matching” to an extreme. Toward this end Hong Kong action filmmakers have developed a number of techniques for matching action as well as implying the continuousness of an action that, when analysed, show considerable discontinuity.

#### THE PROTRACTION OF ACTION AND THE CONTRACTION OF TIME

##### *The Overlapped Match-on-Action*

Pepperman suggests that the match-on-action cut can be considered to be a fairly ‘safe’ cut because the point of transition from one shot to another can be made invisible by well-matched, well-timed, movement (2004: 7). I have established that both Dmytryk and Pepperman have noticed that match-on-action cuts must be discontinuous for a movement to appear continuous across the cut and for this reason they both advocate that rather than the incoming shot taking up the action from exactly where the outgoing shot left off, the incoming shot should include a slight repetition of the movement initiated in the outgoing frames (1984: 32; 2004: 8-9). To recap: Dmytryk suggests an overlap of 3 to 5 frames (1984: 32) and Pepperman



suggests extending the outgoing action by 2 to 3 frames (2004: 8-9). The allowance of an overlap should enable enough time for the eye to adjust to the new shot and for adequate cognitive appraisal to occur. Nowadays this practice is commonly employed for match-on-action cuts but in 1984 Dmytryk lamented that it was ‘quite a subtle technique practiced by relatively few editors’ (32).

We can see the overlap effect by isolating the outgoing frame and the incoming frame of the shots either side of a simple match-on-action cut. Observe Ed (Nick Frost) throwing an object at Mary (Nicola Cunningham) in *Shaun of the Dead* (Edgar Wright, 2004): the outgoing frame shows Ed’s arm extending.



The cut is made and the incoming frame repeats part of the initiated action, beginning in mid-throw.



The movement of Ed’s arm is repeated as it drops from a raised position. This is the fourth frame.



The repetition of the throwing action is “invisible” to the viewer’s eye because the overlap of a few frames allows time for the eye to adjust to the new shot. Such overlapping accounts for the lag between the cut-point and the eye’s recognition of the new shot, which creates the illusion that the movement appears to flow smoothly and naturalistically without causing a mental hiccup.

### *The Elided Match-on-Action*

Contrary to the overlapped match-on-action is what might be described as the ‘elided match-on-action’. Not to be confused with the jump-cut (which is a sudden temporal disruption of an individual shot) the elided match-on-action is the joining of two separate shots which omits part of the complete movement that is being matched. The elided match-on-action has the potential to cause mental hiccups because it does not allow for the ‘evolution from the quick-eye’s reflex to a mindful response’ (Pepperman 2004: 8). Despite this, the elided match-on-action is regularly employed in Hong Kong action films because it is an especially useful technique that, by reducing an action’s screen-time, has the effect of making an action seem swifter (and therefore more dynamic) than it actually is. For example in *The Duel of the Century* (Chor Yuen, 1981) Lu Hsiao Feng (Tony Liu/Liu Yung) sends two yellow-robed minions spinning backwards with a high-kick. In the outgoing frame the body of the first attacker, closest to the camera, is just beginning to turn towards the right.



Upon the incoming frame, the spinning movement of the minion is elided, and he is already fully turned around, away from the kick.



The slight temporal ellipsis enhances the apparent force of the kick by moving the men away from Lu quicker than an overlapped match-on-action would allow.<sup>5</sup> The actors perform the reaction with exaggerated gestures and, as they crash through the railing of the courtyard, the destructible set further emphasises the impact of their fall.



The prevalence of elided match-on-action cuts in Hong Kong action films is also partly explained by the difficulty of the actions being performed on either side of the cut. In *The Duel of the Century* example, before being kicked through the banister, the minions and Lu were engaged in a complicated set piece of choreographed combat. Dividing the performance into two shots ensures that either action (the choreographed combat and the crash through the set) can be performed with relative ease because it doesn't have to be performed in one complete take. Similarly when Yang Han-yun (Cheng Pei-pei) swings to the balcony in *The Shadow Whip* (Lo Wei, 1971), the stunt double has just begun to straddle the balcony in the outgoing frame.

---

<sup>5</sup> Notice that the incoming frame is softened by a slight dissolve caused by the join of the cut.



But in the incoming frame the actor is already bent over the balcony.



This elided match-on-action, combined with the obfuscating distance of the wide shot, aids the on-screen subterfuge of substituting the stunt-double with the actor.

The swiftness of action that is implied by the elision adds cogency to the performance because it also omits an awkward part of the action: flinging the legs over the railing.

Besides aiding performance, elided match-on-action cuts facilitate fast cutting across a number of shots. A series of elided match-on-action cuts can generate a rhythmic burst, which causes the viewer to suspend assessment of an action because there is simply no time to fully appreciate the content of each consecutive shot. One such example can be seen in *The Twelve Gold Medallions* (Cheng Kang, 1970). When Mr. Ma (Wang Hsieh) leaps at Jin Yantang (Ching Miao). Jin strikes Ma as he passes over-head, causing Ma to fall heavily onto the floor. Ma then rises and lurches into a railing. The combined leaping, falling, rising and lurching actions could not be performed in one fluid movement and as a result the actor has performed individual actions to be matched in post-production. In the first shot Ma leaps from a crouching position [24f].



In the second shot Ma flies over Jin who thrusts a hand into Ma's chest [10f].



In the third shot (a wide shot which conceals the work of the stunt man) Ma lands upon the ground [20f].



In the fourth shot Ma is framed from a high angle as he slams onto the ground. A bloody stain on his shirt testifies to the fact that Jin struck him as he passed overhead [33f].

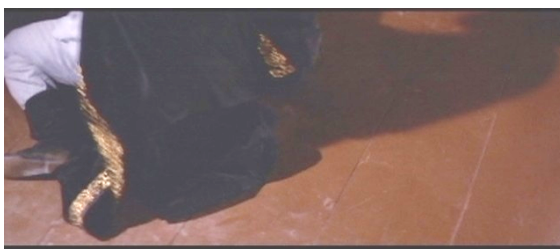


These four shots span a total of 3 seconds and 12 frames – an average shot length (ASL) of 21 frames. If we apply Dmytryk's reasoning – that an overlap should span as few as 3 frames to allow time for the viewer to register the new shot – then we would say that a total of 9 frames of the sequence will remain unrecognised by the



viewer due to the three intervening cuts. This reduces the ASL of ‘perceived’ footage to about 19 frames. So the viewer has little time to register, comprehend and assess each shot. In any case, the shots are supposed to be seen as a continuum, not as individual moments. Confirming this is the second shot, which is not intended to be fully appraised so much as to give an impression of movement because, although it contains a significant action (Jin’s strike to Ma), it spans only 10 frames, each of which is out-of focus – meaning that during this shot the viewer can only perceive a blurry impression of the action.

The fourth and fifth shots of this action confirm the limitations of the in-camera collection of footage because there is a significant spatial dislocation between these shots. The high angle framing of the fourth shot does not allow us to see much of Ma’s face as he rises up off of the floor, while the camera angle of the fifth shot does not allow us to see Ma *begin* to rise off the floor. In the outgoing frame of the fourth high-angle shot Ma is still lifting himself off the ground and beginning to rise upward.



But by the incoming frame of the fifth shot he is already lurching forward [96f].



Ma is moving with enough speed to propel him into a banister.



When isolated as stills, these last two shots look like an awkward match and, as such, they prompt the question: how is it that Ma rushes forward into the rail just after he has fallen so heavily upon his back?

The framing of either shot does not permit an overlap of the actor's movement. If Ma's rise had been cut according to an exacting passage of time there would be a slight delay before he enters the fifth shot. To dwell too long upon the emptying frame would prompt a mental hiccup because frames that are devoid of a point of interest (primarily: the actor's face) can cause the viewer to speculate why they are important. But to cut too soon from the shot of Ma rising up from the ground would draw attention to the relative physical incongruity of Ma then slamming into the railing. So the editor has decided to cut into the fifth shot when Ma is already in motion, lurching forward. By doing this, the editor maintains the forward momentum of the action, which also maintains the momentum of the cognitive process.

In retrospect we can see that Ma getting up and lurching into the railing is an awkward fit within the physics of the whole action. But by carefully timing the cut between these two spatially disconnected framings the editor manages to convince the viewer to infer that the movement between the shots is continuous. The insistent use of elided match-on-action cuts in this example only allows a comprehension of the continuousness of movement rather than a critical assessment of the continuity of the action.

I have previously suggested that a succession of rapid shots and the rapid cumulative cognition of those shots in the mind of the viewer is a boon to the editor. This example shows that the rationalisation of rapid constructively edited action is expected (by the filmmaker) to occur after the action – not during. Only within the last shot is there enough of a pause for the viewer to consider the previous burst of action. Despite the impossible physics of the total action the viewer recognises, as Ma forcefully collides with the railing, that he has not been fully in control of his movement towards the left of screen such was the power of Jin's strike. The expressive gestures of the actors also encourage this interpretation.

I have established that a useful effect of rapid editing is that it does not allow much time to for the viewer to consider the plausibility of an action, which is a boon to practitioners of constructive editing who seek to present implausible feats. But elided match-on-action cuts are often a design feature borne of necessity. The in-camera collection of the details of an action, by the camera operator and choreographer, does not prioritise nor ensure coverage. So the opportunity to overlap the action in post-production is a luxury.

### *The Ultra-Elided Match-on-Action*

In Hong Kong action filmmaking the elision of part of an action has been pushed to extremes. What might be called the *ultra*-elided match-on-action cut is one that omits a substantial section of a continuous action from one shot to the next. In truth, we are now getting into territory where it cannot be said that the action is actually *matched*



from one shot to the next because so much of the action is elided. In this sense we might alternatively call it the mis-match-on-action cut. But as the movement in the second shot fulfils the movement instigated in the first shot there is a consecutive relationship between shots that has been intentionally constructed by the editor. For instance in the kung fu comedy, *The Miracle Fighters* (Yuen Woo-Ping, 1982), when Shu Geng (Yuen Yat Chor) performs a leap, he begins to jump into the air.



In the out-going frame both his eyes and raised arms have exited the top of the frame.



The incoming frame of the next shot shows Shu already tucked into a somersault in mid-air.



Temporal and spatial continuity between the shots is disrupted by the elision.

Additionally, Shu is initially shown looking upward to the left but the trajectory of his somersault travels left to right, so the implied screen direction between the two shots is also reversed which adds the dynamism of a spatial conflict to this particular action. The spatial and temporal collision between these two shots supports Sergei

Eisenstein's assertion of the affective force of montage, that 'montage is an idea that arises from the collision of independent shots – shots even opposite to one another' (1957: 49). But the continuousness of the action is inferred by the immediate relationship between two consecutive shots. Like the die tossed into the bottle in the Zatoichi example set out earlier in this chapter, we anticipate the second shot based upon the movement initiated by the first; and despite the conflicting screen direction of the two shots Shu's eyeline does give an indication of where the action will take place – through the air. So the ultra-elided match-on-action maintains a continuousness of action, meaning that an action initiated in the first shot is obviously continued in the second but in an advanced state.

Continuity of screen direction is not a pre-requisite for either the elided match-on-action or the ultra-elided match-on-action so much as the continuousness of the action itself. However there are cuts that, while maintaining the continuousness of movement from shot to shot, do not maintain the original action itself. Two further types of edits that can be identified within, and associated with, the Hong Kong film style are those which, rather than involving the explicit matching of actions across individual shots, match, from one individual shot to the next, the general sense of motion involved in an exchange. I have called two of these the cut-in on motion edit and the match-on-motion to a parallel edit. Particularly in the case of the former edit type, the recognition of the match across shots in terms of motion generally, rather than action specifically, is important, as the first shot often does not give any indication as to what the action will be in the second shot. However a sense of continuousness is achieved through the creative exploration by editors within the

constructive editing system of production that is unconstrained by the traditional demands of the continuity system.

### *The Cut-In on Motion*

On close inspection the following examples push the relationship between the action that is initiated in the first shot and fulfilled in the second shot to extremes because here the action in the second shot is not indicated by the action in the first shot. Additionally the shots do not display a significant spatial dislocation that might be expected in a match-on-action cut. For example, in Hu's *The Valiant Ones* an outgoing frame shows an attacker leaping downward.



But the incoming frame has the actor already extended in a kicking motion and he is pushing his opponent away.



Like an elided match-on-action cut, the time between actions has been contracted but the action itself is discontinuous. But for the slight reframing of the shot this would be called a jump cut. However, the reframing is significant as it indicates that a take has not been cut into but that the camera has been repositioned to best capture the

action of the second shot. Moreover, the action expressed in the second shot is not indicated by the first shot – so the word ‘motion’ rather than ‘action’ befits this type of cut.

Another example of a cut-in on motion edit can be seen in Yuen Woo-ping’s *Iron Monkey*, which provides us with an example of the way that Yuen utilises a cut-in on motion edit to both create and to best frame an impossible action. This cut-in on motion example is, in turn, concealed by drawing the viewer’s attention to the edge of the frame when the eponymous hero, Iron Monkey, kicks a Shaolin monk right off the edge of frame.



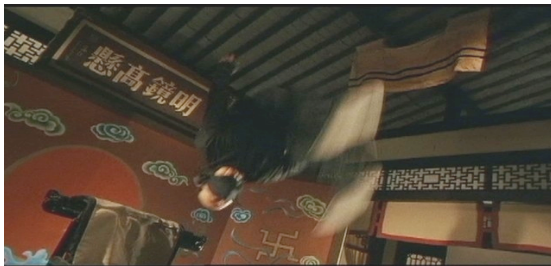
In the outgoing frame, as the monk flies backwards, drawing the viewer’s eye with him, Iron Monkey has only just begun to rest his foot upon a pedestal.



A cut is then made to an incoming frame that shows Iron Monkey in mid-air, finishing a somersault.



Apart from the change in camera framing this could also almost be described as a jump cut. But again the reframing is significant. Compositionally the camera angle emphasises numerous diagonal lines of the set and channels our attention to the centre of the shot where Iron Monkey's bald head is the initial focal point. But by time the eye registers the new shot the action is still taking place on the right half of the screen because Iron Monkey's feet kick downward through the air in that screen zone, so the viewer's eye has not had to trace too far back to the center of the screen before encountering this action.



Iron Monkey lands and adopts a stance, which is accompanied by a slight upward tilt of the camera.



This is another example of a cut uniting two actions that cannot be performed in one shot. It further indicates that in-camera editing anticipates this edit and discontinuity is disregarded in the knowledge that the editor will fine-tune the footage.

The movement of the monk off-screen helps to distract the eye and conceals the cut. The viewers who watched the monk's trajectory will find their attention drawn by Iron Monkey's flipping motion, back into the middle of the screen, to see Iron Monkey suddenly, but gracefully, rising to a standing position. In the unlikely event that the viewers' eyes were not drawn with the monk's movement to the edge of the frame then the relatively subtle frame adjustment still goes unnoticed due to the motional match meaning that there is strong movement across the cut, albeit movement generated by two different actions. In this instance, the effect is aided by negated eye-trace due to the over-lap of focal points between Iron Monkey's foot coming to rest on the pedestal and his bald head, or (if the viewer's eyes are drawn with the monk) then Iron Monkey's feet swiftly fill the void vacated by the monk and the eye is drawn to that movement; either of these responses conceals the discontinuity between the cuts.

Like the example of the cut-in on motion from *The Valiant Ones*, the second shot provides a closer framing of the initial space and the reduction of shot scale in the second shot increases the dimension of the bodies, making them occupy a greater area of the screen that helps to direct the eye to their significant action. The *Iron Monkey* example shows that Hu's use of the cut-in on motion technique was refined by later directors so that the extent of the elision becomes extreme and the continuity between shots implied at best. But the rapid succession of shots and the instinctive cognitive response of the viewer causes a search for continuity to be found in cleverly presented movement that appears to have a continuousness from shot to shot.

The next type of cut to be addressed is also particularly ingenious as it enables the sensation of an initiated action to be resumed in a different area.

*The Match-on-Motion to a Parallel Edit*

When a fight sequence features multiple combatants fighting in different areas, a match-on-action cut that operates as a parallel edit can be a useful technique to imply that a ferocious contest will continue even after the cut to another contest. In what might be termed the match-on-motion to a parallel edit, the editor cuts on an action in both the outgoing shot and incoming shot but the action in the incoming shot resolves the action of the outgoing shot. Like the cut-in on motion, the match-on-motion to a parallel edit operates more as a matching of a general sense of motion between shots than as an explicit continuation of an action. Although the subject actors are different it implies that the movement is connected somehow. The bamboo forest fight sequence of Hu's *A Touch of Zen* provides an example of this type of cut when a soldier swings at Yang.



On the outgoing frame his arm is nearly fully extended.



On the incoming frame of the next shot, General Shih is beginning to strike.





So with this particular match-on-motion to a parallel edit there is an overlap of the striking action as General Shih resumes the strike with a similar high, lateral slash. Across the cut the viewer's eye-trace swings from the centre-right screen zone back to the centre-left screen zone (the following shows the third frame of the incoming shot).



Because Shih repeats the soldier's slash from the opposite direction this technique gives the impression that the soldier's strike is countered by Shih's parry. The action is not paused in the transition to another area and another pair of combatants, but like the motional match it keeps the forward momentum of the combat sequence.

It should also be noted that this is a relatively infrequent type of cut within Hong Kong films. Still, it further demonstrates the possibilities for narratives that take place within multiple areas of action and of a film style that is not necessarily beholden to the space in which that action takes place. Furthermore the technique maintains excitement through a sense of dislocated continuousness.

When action sequences have been masterfully staged, choreographed, shot and edited, the procession of shots can generate a lucid engagement with the mind so that



each successive shot might persuade the viewer of an action occurring as a continuum, not as a construction. The Hong Kong action film style attempts to override the viewer's critical observation and potential screen consciousness to engender excitement through an engagement with dynamic action. Thus a range of match-on-action and match-on-motion edits have been adopted by editors to create a sense of continuous, plausible and dynamic action in the context of often physically impossible feats. In particular these include the distinct types of the overlapped match-on-action, the elided and ultra-elided match-on-actions, the cut-in on motion edit and the match-on-motion to a parallel edit. Enabled by the constructive editing system, these editing techniques form an important part of the Hong Kong film style.

The next chapter closely examines the design of some of the key fantastic feats that have been depicted within the *wuxia* film genre. Whereas the pursuit of novelty is a *constant* drive to excel stylistically (shedding novelties that become too familiar), the cyclic demand for fantastic or realistic expressions of combat generates an *oscillating* type of stylistic reinvention. By analysing the technical development of some common *wuxia* feats we will see how the genre has swung back and forth between realistic and fantastic representations of heroic skill and how this has affected stylistic change. In particular we can see what role constructive editing has played in this pursuit and how editing techniques have evolved to befit the desired stylisation of the feats being constructed.