CHAPTER FOUR

of

CUTTING ACTION

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

PhD Thesis
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STYLISTIC PRIORITIES:

CONSTRUCTING REALISTIC AND FANTASTIC SKILL

In *wuxia* filmmaking the stylistic reinvention of requisite fantastic feats is an ongoing process. New stylisation is encouraged by changing audience demands and is facilitated by a number of factors such as advances in film technology and the pursuit of novelty. There is also an identifiable oscillation between realistic and fantastic action, which can be isolated and demonstrated through the analysis of a number of generic actions. Such analysis underscores the Bazinian idea that realism is an influence upon film style and that the definition of realism fluctuates according to the proclivities of the time period (Bazin 1997: 6). This chapter provides an analysis of key developments in the editing of distinctive *wuxia* feats that have undergone a variety of stylistic variations. In particular feats such as the weightless leap, palm power and the casting of flying swords have each endured the cyclic transition between fantastic and realistic depictions to become staple *wuxia* action events although, in the process, they have been redesigned to accord with popular taste, directorial choice and production company directives. This chapter proceeds with a consecutive analysis of these three feats and confirms Bazin's claim. Each feat is addressed within a loose chronological framework to show how their depiction has developed over time.

These analyses will also show that the Hong Kong action film style is dedicated to visual excitement, which means that the most dynamic method of presenting action is often utilised regardless of its potential defiance of realism. Although we will see that Hong Kong action filmmakers recurrently pursue the aesthetics of realism, the pursuit of novelty and the advent of new technology often swing the *wuxia* genre back to its fantastic origins. If one of the aspects of cinematic realism is the invisibility of filmmaking techniques, as in the Western continuity system, then there is plenty of evidence to suggest that Hong Kong action filmmakers are not interested in maintaining cinematic realism so much as they are concerned with having an impact upon the viewer. This is not to say that the Hong Kong techniques are visible, rather it is to assert that the dynamism of affect triumphs over the concern for an invisibility of technique. Each of the three generic feats that are examined in this chapter exhibit a return to fantastic stylisation despite being realistically reinvented during the New Era when more plausible combat-feats were on the filmmakers' agenda.

The longevity of the *wuxia* genre has seen its popularity rise and fall and the presentation of heroic action in the *wuxia* film has oscillated between fantastic and realistic depictions of heroic feats with each cycle prompted by shifting trends in film style. When the *wuxia* film ebbed in popularity, the genres that flourished had sprouted from the *wuxia* genre. Some of the defining aesthetics of kung fu films and police action drama films have since been re-absorbed by the *wuxia* film. During each aesthetic shift Hong Kong's action filmmakers have refined the techniques developed locally, as well as those adopted from abroad, resulting in an action film style that is constantly being modernized.

In his memoirs Chang Cheh asserted that it is the evolutionary capacity of the Hong Kong martial arts film that enables it to succeed and win new fans around the world. He noticed that the genre flourished during the 1960s and 1970s because it oscillated between representing Northern and Southern martial arts styles (Chang 2004: 130-138). He asserted that a vital difference between the two styles is that the Northern martial arts style is 'on the flashy side' and the Southern style is more realistic (Chang 2004: 131). Furthermore the alternation between flamboyant and realistic film styles has ensured that the martial arts genre has maintained its vogue. According to Chang the evolution then occurred on a global scale:

> The cycle is still ongoing. From being showy to realistic, it has shifted to become showy again with the incorporation of CGI special effects, taking a leaf from Western productions. The current situation is that Hollywood has incorporated some distinctive features of Hong Kong action films into their productions, and local cinema has learned to use some Western techniques. The benefit is mutual. It has always been so in each cycle. (2004: 133)

The successful adaptation of the Hong Kong film style is due to the Hong Kong filmmaker's predilection to experiment with existing techniques and a willingness to adopt new techniques in the pursuit of novelty. Yet despite the cyclic shift between realistic and showy aesthetics the *wuxia* film has always required directors to depict certain heroic feats that are fundamentally integral to the genre. Without such feats a martial arts film moves further away from the defining characteristics of *wuxia*.

Because there can be numerous reasons for stylistic change, pinpointing the moment of transition from one film style to another is a difficult task and the publicity that Shaw Brothers gave their 'colour *wuxia* century' in late 1965 is an unusual sign-posting of a new direction in stylistic priorities. Stylistic trends more commonly gain momentum over time before being incorporated into the mainstream film style and therefore the periodic chronology that I have devised is intended as an

acknowledgement of significant shifts in film style and not as a wholly definitive timetable. There are also sudden technological advances that prompt sudden stylistic changes too – often enabling the return of fantastic feats with novel aplomb. Mindful of these concerns, I have examined depictions of the weightless leap, palm power and the casting of flying swords, each in a chronologically consecutive order so as to identify the development of significant stylistic changes in the depiction of heroic feats. The priority, however, is to examine the ways in which constructive editing has been applied during shifts in the aesthetic presentations of realism and fantasy.

DEPICTIONS OF THE WEIGHTLESS LEAP

The stylistic/generic tension between sustaining incredible, fantastic feats whilst responding to demands for realism is readily evident in the examples of the weightless leap examined in this chapter. Initially the weightless leap was shown in a single shot but eventually constructive editing came to be used to break up the feat into component parts. Constructive editing was employed to show cause and effect shots where shot A (the launch) leads to shot B (the landing). By the New Era there was often an insert of the actor's feet (what I have called a 'kick-off shot') placed between shots A and B to aid the sense of reality by showing the physical propulsion of the leaper. A similar three shot pattern will also be evident in the examination of the depiction of flying swords where a shot between the 'release' and 'result' becomes included to show the actual flight of the projectile. More recently the advent of CGI has enabled filmmakers to return to single shot depictions of these feats and, in this way, the feats return to the shot-contained action of the Silent Era.

Meanwhile the rise to dominance of the kung fu genre in the 1970s redefined concepts of realism by introducing the idea of 'real fighting' to the martial arts film's quest for authenticity (Teo 2003a: 24). At this time constructive editing had, ironically, become indicative of falsity because of its capacity to enable the substitution of the stuntman for the actor. At this time the weightless leap was transmuted into the 'flying kick' but, as we shall see, its depiction still relied upon constructive editing.

The Transition to Film

The initial transition of the *xia*'s fantastic martial arts skills from literature and opera to silent film meant that heroic feats had to sustain singularly visual appraisal within a two-dimensional context (Zhang 2005: 199-243). Depictions of the *xia*'s impossible skills were lauded as a primary attraction. For instance a promotional article for *Heroine Li Feifei* (Runje Shaw, 1925) read: 'Historical legends and anecdotes chronicle stories of knights-errant climbing walls and leaping over roofs, but now you can see for yourself this incomparable skill on the big screen.'[1] The skill was 'incomparable' because performances of the *xia*'s acrobatic martial arts skills were showcased at both the Beijing Opera as well as in film but their physically impossible, fantastic skills could only be *implied* through acrobatics at the opera but *observed* at the cinema.

The novelty of seeing the *xia*'s fantastic feats unencumbered by the restrictions of the stage outweighed any concern about realistic filmmaking, so brazen techniques were readily employed. Animation, double-exposures, images painted directly onto

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[1] Zhongyang Dai Xiyuan advertisement in 'Ben Bu Zeng Kan' ('City Supplement'), Shen Bao, Shanghai, 17 December 1925 in Wong Ain-ling ed. *The Shaw Screen: A Preliminary Study*, Hong Kong Film Archive, 2003, p.26.

film-stock, mythical beasts played by acrobats in animal costumes all combined to generate a cinema of fantastic adventure. In addition to the more brazen filmmaking techniques, the feat of weightless leaping was also commonly shot as a single take in a wide frame which showed the actor leaping to a higher position. In actuality the actor dropped down and the action was reversed to show the actor leaping upwards.

The marvelous filmic realization of the *xia*'s fantastic skills proved enormously popular with contemporary audiences and the *wuxia* genre blossomed on screen.[2] But having been outlawed on the mainland, *wuxia* film production relocated to Hong Kong.[3] Initially the Cantonese film industry's depiction of the *xia*'s skills was influenced by the Shanghainese model and with its perpetuation and enhancement of magical elements the early Cantonese depiction of *wuxia* combat earned itself the epithet *fantastique* (Liu 1996: 54). Fantastic powers endured as did the film techniques used to show them. On the eve of the implementation of the New Era's realistic style, *The Furious Buddha's Palm* (Ling Yun, 1965), was still unabashedly using old-school techniques such as superimposition to represent flight and the flight of a giant eagle is presented as an image of the suited actor (Chan Siu-pang) flapping his arms then superimposed upon a tilting shot of clouds, making it look as though he is swooping down.

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[2] Cheng-Sim Lim reports that the fusion of 'modernity (technology and speed, comic books, popular novels and serialized newspaper stories) and folkloric culture (traditional opera and acrobatics)' was a major draw-card, such that two hundred martial arts films were produced during the years 1927-1931 (2003: 2).
[3] The genre was still very popular and Yu Mo-wan has confirmed that 145 films were made between 1949-1959 (1996: 100).

This out-moded technique now existed alongside newer innovations like wirework.[4] Although the development of wirework was to revolutionize the design of the weightless leap, this technique did not reach maturity until, inspired by *Superman* (Richard Donner, 1978), Tsui Hark required groups of stuntmen in *Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain* (1983) to not only levitate but glide, swoop and dive. In the 1960s wirework was time consuming, taking up to six hours to set up a flight scene but Tsui's mass-leaping wirework vision took one week of setting up time to capture one shot (Li 2006: 141). Production time has little defense against the pursuit of novelty.

Constructive Editing Developments

By the early 1960s constructive editing was not yet a prominent feature of the Hong Kong film style but cutaway close-ups were being used to provide details of significant moments within a battle. The Yuet Ngee produced film, *The Dragon, The Phoenix* (Wu Pang, 1963), saw the first collaboration of the long-running Lau Kar-leung and Tong Kai action choreography partnership and they resisted stage-style manoeuvres to make the action in *The Dragon, The Phoenix* more cinematically accomplished.[5] One way to do this was to provide the viewer with closer perspectives of the action and the framing of a fight between the heroine and an enraged attacker alternates between individual mid-shots and a two-shot in medium-long framing. Another way is to provide unique perspectives so Lau and Tong included cutaways to show pertinent actions in (relative) close-up, such as when the

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[4] Curiously, the actor wearing that eagle suit was instrumental in the application of wirework. Chan Siu-pang claims to have first used wirework on *Marching Down the South (Part 1)* (Kang Yi/Miu Hong-nee, 1963) and was inspired to do so after watching circus training and noting the safety harnesses that they used (Li 2006: 140).
[5] Because Tong was trained at a northern martial arts school, and Lau at a southern school, their collaboration meant that one could choreograph the protagonist while the other organised the antagonist's moves thus developing interesting fight sequences which mixed fighting styles (Li 2006: 49-50).

attacker's foot pins the heroine's arm to the ground and when a sword pierces a

pole.[6]

Lau and Tong's intent to advance cinematic technique is also shown in their

constructively edited treatment of the weightless leap. In *The Dragon, The Phoenix*

the brother's jump to the roof is rendered in two shots rather than just one though the

feat still employs the reverse-motion technique. The first shot shows the brother

crouching, preparing to jump and the second shot shows him landing on the top of

the roof. The second shot of the leap employs the reverse-motion technique. When

Tong and Lau collaborated on *Temple of the Red Lotus* in 1965 they repeated this

method of using two shots to show a number of leaps. In one such instance Brother

Du (Lo Lieh) is first shown entering a courtyard in a wide shot, walking to the

perimeter wall, crouching and beginning to leap.

The next shot from a low angle shows Brother Du beginning his jump in mid air,

then landing on the roof and standing up.

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[6] 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.

The division of the leap into two shots alleviates some of the awkward appearance of a body's motion in reverse and the placement of the cut is primarily determined by the physics of the action during shooting. In the first shot the actor jumped off the ground but because he was not suspended from wires he could not vacate the wide shot and subsequently dropped back down to the ground. So the cut has to be made before he began to drop. To give the impression of continuity the second shot completes the initiated action with an overlapped match-on-action showing Brother Du ascending and landing on the roof. The camera framing remains wide for both shots, which keeps the figure to a relatively small size and so the focal point of the action across the cut is kept to within a small area of the frame that limits the viewer's eye-trace.

In *Temple of the Red Lotus* some of the reverse-motion leaps are shown in a single shot. At other times the novelty is multiplied by showing a group leaping all at once. The technique is so over-used in *Temple of the Red Lotus* that at one point the central male character, Wu (Jimmy Wang Yu), jumps out of a river in reverse motion, yet the passage of action has not motivated such a flashy exit nor does his character appear to have the particularly advanced martial arts skills that would warrant such a maneuver. Although *Temple of the Red Lotus* was among the first run of films intended to establish Shaw's New Era, it ultimately failed to break new ground. By Tong Kai's own reckoning there were no novel ideas amidst the action choreography

and he said: 'We hadn't made any progress yet; we simply added to *The Dragon, The Phoenix* action sequences' (Li 2006: 50).

Although Lau and Tong's filmmaking showed closer, unique and edited moments of action the New Era directors began to experiment with this technique and used it far more thoroughly than before. Constructive editing was foremost among the techniques to be readily deployed as part of the New Era style and King Hu was one of the principal exponents of the technique. Yet stylistic freedom with this technique required an overhaul of the industry's production methods, which entailed a great deal of learning and re-learning on behalf of the cast and crew. Hu attempted to ensure that the cast and crew were made aware of his vision and so, in preparation for shooting, he would take actors to the editing suite to teach them editing concepts.[7]

Hu's prolific use of constructive editing meant that his crew had to spend more production time collecting the shots required for the action that would be constructed. Over half of the duration of *Come Drink With Me* is committed to the presentation of fight sequences using constructive editing.[8] Unsurprisingly, the time it took to complete a production increased and instead of the usual twenty days of shooting, *Come Drink With Me* took fifty days of shooting (Lau 1996a: 214). According to the action choreographer, Han Yingjie, 'the number of shots increased and close-ups were used more frequently' (Lau 1996a: 215). Rather than filming

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[7] I learned this through discussion with Cheng Pep-pei at the Melbourne International Film Festival, 2003.
[8] *Come Drink With Me:* total duration: 90 minutes. Duration of fight sequences: 45 minutes 39 seconds. Duration of non-fight sequences: 44 minutes 21 seconds.

fight sequences in a master shot and occasional cut-ins the crew now 'filmed only two or three, or sometimes, just a single maneuver in a shot' (Lau 1996a: 215).[9]

Through the deft direction of choreography, camera-work and editing Hu was able to present action sequences that enhanced the cogency and, hence, the comprehension of the *xia*'s magical powers. Through stylistic embellishment he made otherwise out-moded magical powers more palatable to contemporary audiences. Additionally he chose to portray magical skills that were not as outrageous as those of the Shanghainese *shenguai* (sword and sorcery) and Cantonese *fantastique* films, electing instead to portray magical skills that could be rendered "realistic" through constructive editing; notably: the weightless leap, the ability to become non-corporeal, to shoot jets of steam from the hands and to throw projectiles with great accuracy.

Defining Heroic Skill in the New Era

In the New Era the *xia*'s execution of fantastic skill had to appear more realistic as well as matching and surpassing the cinematic expertise conveyed by foreign action films. Fantastic feats such as the weightless leap were now under scrutiny and had to be re-invented to suit popular taste. Rapid constructive editing helped to make the fantastic martial arts skills of the *xia* more impressive to audiences that were otherwise inured to the display of fantastic powers. Because the *xia* could no longer acceptably surmount obstacles with a weightless leap in a single shot, there had to be a visual explanation of their levitation. The division of the feat into a launch shot and

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[9] Hu's unorthodox methods ultimately brought him into conflict with his producer, Run Run Shaw, so that by the time *Come Drink With Me* (his only *wuxia* film for Shaw Brothers) was released Hu had already quit the company.

an in-flight shot helped to show the physical effort expended by the *xia* and went some way to explaining how they could leap so high. The film style of action became a significant concern for New Era directors who responded to the call for more realistic action.

Wuxia films often exhibit distinct directorial choices that shape the expression of generic feats. The restrictions that directors decide to place upon the *xia*'s otherwise mighty powers help to delineate the realism of New Era *wuxia* productions. Chang Cheh, for one, strove to make his spectacles adhere to the sense of physics exemplified by the samurai and Bond films whereby characters do not have fantastic powers but rely on their creativity, dexterity, strength and luck to overcome obstacles. In his film *Tiger Boy* (1966) Chang abandoned the weightless leap and reinvented the feat in a manner that, by his own standards, was far more believable, saying:

> there was a scene which depicted Jimmy Wang Yu, the nemesis, seeking vengeance by breaking in the house of his enemy, a thug. The exterior wall is a wooden fence (it has more texture and crudeness than a plank). Instead of taking a flying leap over the fence with a little help from the wirework, Wang shoots arrows into a wooden column to form a ladder. He then holds onto the ladder and climbs up. It's a highly realistic and stylized scene. (2004: 82)

There is a distinct tension between 'highly realistic' yet 'stylized' aesthetics. To adhere to the New Era's pursuit of realism Chang opts to replace unaided flight with another fanciful spectacle that downplays the super-heroic powers of the *xia*, but it is not necessarily a more believable way to scale a wall.[10]

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[10] The same feat has recently been reinvented as a spectacular heroic action in the Hollywood fairytale film, *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (Mike Newell, 2010).

The film *Tiger Boy* is rarely discussed in detail as it has all but vanished and we must rely upon Chang's memoirs to conceive of it. However we can discern a similar logical approach to the scaling of walls in Chang's *The Heroic Ones* (1970). In this film the particularly tall exterior walls of the enemy stronghold also require more complicated maneuvering to scale than a single leap. As a result these tall walls also demand more complex constructive editing to demonstrate the scaling maneuvers. This time the action is rendered with even greater deference to the difficulty of the action than in *Tiger Boy*. The heroes use grappling hooks to scale the outer walls of the imposing Changon Fortress. The feat is shown in a constructively edited sequence which intercuts between the outer and inner parts of the wall. First the heroes are shown twirling and throwing the hooks up.

The hooks secure a hold.

The men climb up the ropes.

Then the men appear, crouched among the crenellations.

Chang re-stages this rope-climb feat on four separate occasions during the film, indicating a directorial satisfaction with the spectacle that it provides.

Unaided, super-heroic leaping does occur in *The Heroic Ones*; the film is not devoid of fantastic feats but they are stylised toward Chang's conception of what makes an action more realistic. The heroes can leap *down* from impossible heights: the first shot shows them dropping and the second shows them landing. Sometimes reverse-motion or wirework is used to show heroes leaping *upwards* but in these instances the upward leap usually spans a distance that is shorter than the tall, exterior fortress wall. When the most powerful hero of the clan, Li Tsun Hsiao (David Chiang), leaps to the top of the outer wall he does so from the back of a galloping horse, thus reducing the distance of the leap and giving him an added velocity. Thus the heroic limitations within the film indicate that, although these heroes can perform heroic leaps, they cannot leap over exterior fortress walls from a standing start or without aid, requiring ropes or galloping horses to do so.

Tiger Boy's inventive arrow-ladder and *The Heroic Ones*' grappling hooks enable Chang's *xia* to scale obstacles without resorting to overtly fantastic displays of skill. With the aid of constructive editing Chang simply reinvents and redesigns the *xia*'s weightless leaping skill to accord with Shaw's claim for realism in action. Constructive editing may not render an action believable but the accumulation of detailed component shots can make it comprehensible. Similarly Stephen Teo has

181

suggested that the 'early scenes' of *Come Drink With Me* establish 'a set of relatively

realistic conventions and limitations for its swordplay, in effect spelling out the

natural laws of the world in which the story takes place' (2003a: 24). Teo refers to

the way in which constructive editing is used in the first two fight sequences of

Come Drink With Me to express visceral combat and heroic dexterity (respectively),

which determines the limitations of the characters, grounding them in more realistic

displays of combat (2003a: 24). Teo also notes that in later fight sequences there are

exponents of more fantastical skill, saying that '[i]n the down-to-earth context that

has been carefully established, the supernatural powers of Fan [Drunken Cat] and his

adversary, the apostate monk Liao Kong ... [Abbot Liao Kung], are like intruders

from another level of reality, which is to say, from the *jiang hu* of legend' (2003a:

24). To investigate Teo's claims further the next section closely examines how

constructive editing is used to show how either type of hero (the 'realistic', lesser

skilled hero and the fantastic, greater skilled hero) performs a feat of weightless

leaping that covers an identical distance at the start of the third fight sequence in

Come Drink With Me.

Differentiation between Greater and Lesser Heroic Skill in Come Drink With Me

In Hu's film *The Valiant Ones* (1975) Bordwell has identified that the edited

movement of characters corresponds with their fighting skill. There is a difference

between the ways that greater and lesser skills are constructed. Bordwell notes that:

> a Japanese swordsman leaps down from a second story room, and the
> movement is handled in a straightforward, continuous way. In reply Wu
> Jiyuan leaps toward him, and this jump is treated in a highly elliptical
> fashion, as if already marking him as superior to his foe. But when the
> renegade Chinese master Xu Lian (Han Yingjie) hurries to confront Wu, his
> rush is presented in dazzling ellipses, announcing him as Wu's equal. (1998:
> 38)

In Hu's films greater heroic skill is often rendered with ultra-elliptical and impressionistic constructive editing whereas lesser skills tend to be explained more explicitly through the constructive editing of obvious and 'readable' details. The construction of heroic skill in *Come Drink With Me* confirms Bordwell's observation.

The first fight sequence in *Come Drink With Me* displays the bloody brutality of the villains and the second fight sequence establishes Golden Swallow's effortless dominance over those villains.[11] Next, the pivotal scene that distinguishes between fantastic and realistic modes of constructive editing is the chase between Golden Swallow and Drunken Cat. This sequence is intended to reveal Drunken Cat's magical nature to both the audience and to Golden Swallow. The emotional profile of the chase oscillates between Golden Swallow's frustration and Drunken Cat's teasing which generates a comical tone. The action plays out like so: Golden Swallow walks from her room to the balcony and sees Drunken Cat sitting at a table below wearing her hat and in possession of her knives. She demands her items back and getting no response she vaults from the balcony to the ground floor of the inn.

The following wide-shot establishes Golden Swallow's acrobatic skill. A few frames pass before her feet drop into frame on the top right of screen and she begins to drop behind a cluster of tables. She springs back up (thanks to a carefully concealed

[11] Excepting the bosses Jade Faced Tiger and Abbot Liao Kung both of whom she meets later in the film

trampoline) and executes a somersault across the screen from right to left towards Drunken Cat (the brim of the hat on Drunken Cat's head can just be made out as a white, "Saturn's rings" shape on the left of screen).

This wide shot helps to conceal the visage of the somersaulting stuntman and it also provides lateral space for the acrobatic performance to take place. Additionally the way that Golden Swallow springs back into view gives the viewer a preliminary indication that her skills are predicated upon acrobatic strength and dexterity – not fantastic, magical power.

The eye-trace in the wide shot follows the trajectory of her body towards the left of screen but her action remains unfinished, so at the beginning of the next shot she is finishing that jumping movement by moving away from the right.

It is here, as Drunken Cat pulls away from Golden Swallow's grasp, that we begin to see how Hu will treat *fantastic* heroic skill in this film. Golden Swallow lunges at Drunken Cat, reaching into the middle of the frame but he is already twisting away. The lateral right to left movement of the somersault in the previous wide shot is now countered with a left to right camera movement as a diagonal whip-pan towards the

top right corner of the frame emphasises Drunken Cat's escape. More than that, the whip-pan gives an impression that the streaking movement *is* his movement.

When the frames are isolated we can see that the whip-pan pulls away from Drunken Cat and Golden Swallow – streaking their image into a blur.

For a single frame, the outgoing frame, the screen is almost completely black.
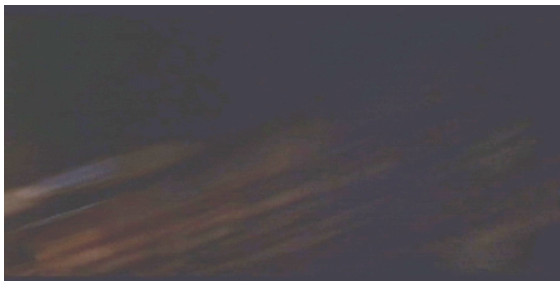
The loss of focus and the empty black frame cause a deliberate mental hiccup that primes the audience to re-focus upon the following picture. The incoming shot is staged from a low angle, ostensibly from near Golden Swallow's perspective and Drunken Cat drops into the frame in slow motion.

The collision between the dynamic whip-pan and the subsequent slow-motion static shot of Drunken Cat dropping onto the balcony generates a visual impact. Even though an entry from the top or bottom of the frame is the fastest route to the centre of the screen the slow motion prolongs the time-span of his dropping motion, making the shot measure 35 frames. This grants the audience more time to appreciate the movement against the cross-hatched shadows of the set. Additionally the static frame, in conjunction with slow motion, provides a rhythmic pause to the active burst of the previous three shots.

Between these two shots there is no obvious match-on-action and the implication arising from this graphic and motional collision is that Drunken Cat has leapt from the ground onto the balcony. The swiftness of the blurred whip-pan (the shot lasts 18 frames while the whip-pan within that shot takes only 5 frames) causes us to see nothing with clarity and so we must retrospectively rationalise this amazing feat. Slow motion is also an indicator that a particular action is noteworthy of special emphasis. Because of this spectacular, attention-grabbing aspect of the technique, slow motion indicates a potential tension between spectacle and narrative; however, in this case the technique is used because the slowed action has narrative importance by providing a way for the audience to glimpse the otherwise unobservable fantastic skills of this hero. That Drunken Cat can leap so swiftly, so far and so high, is an indication of the potential of his fantastic skill and it promises more fantastic action to come. Throughout the film there are moments when his movements become

invisible because there are such large temporal ellipses between the initiation and resolution of his actions. At other times his actions are completely unseen. For example after he jumps to the balcony he is suddenly inside Golden Swallow's room, poking his head out and pulling faces at her.

Drunken Cat's fantastic skill can barely be comprehended by a character within the same room, let alone the viewer. As though anticipating the viewer's incredulity at Drunken Cat's leap, Hu inserts a swift prompting reaction shot of Golden Swallow's astonishment [25f].

By and large we can reconcile the minor heroic feats in *Come Drink With Me* because we are shown the physical actions that are employed to accomplish those feats. Conversely we are not often shown how fantastic feats like super-speed or weightless leaping are achieved. Hu understands that the fantastic skills we haven't seen need to be confirmed for us and he does this in the case of Drunken Cat's weightless leap by providing prompting reaction shots of Golden Swallow. As we have seen in the example of the parlour trick in *Zatoichi: The Fugitive* (Tokuzo Tanaka, 1963), outlined in the previous chapter, reaction shots do more than just show us a character's response; they also prompt the viewer's mirror neuron response to replicate the actor's reaction. Due to mirror neuron function the viewer recognises the actor's reaction and may even mimic it, so that by replicating Golden Swallow's reaction the viewer might replicate awe at Drunken Cat's feat and become vicariously impressed.

Compared to Golden Swallow, Drunken Cat has superior martial arts skills and the difference between them is shown with the same methodology that Bordwell observed of the difference between the skill of lesser and greater martial artists in *The Valiant Ones*: Drunken Cat's skills are handled with an ultra-elliptical, impressionistic style whereas Golden Swallow's skill is treated in a straightforward, comprehensible manner. So when Golden Swallow follows Drunken Cat with her own leap to the balcony Hu constructs the action in three shots. First of all, a reaction shot of Golden Swallow becomes a launching shot. The camera dips to emphasise her upward pouncing movement and this also serves to decrease the amount of time it takes for her head to exit the frame. Also, as with the examination of Brother Du's leap in *Temple of The Red Lotus* earlier in this chapter, the cut must be made before she begins to drop back down into shot.

The next shot is key to the indication that Golden Swallow's leap is grounded in a sense of realism. Hu inserts a kick-off shot of Golden Swallow's feet touching the legs of the upturned benches [24f].

In the third shot, a mid-shot, she lands on the balcony.
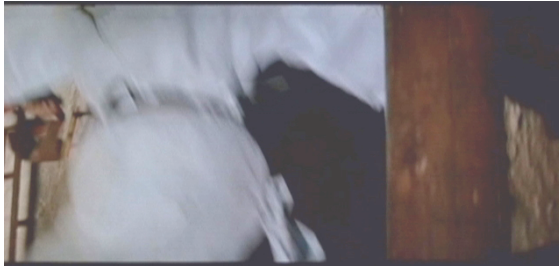
An important difference between Golden Swallow's leap and the leaping style in the *fantastique* Cantonese films is the insertion of the kick-off as a detailed close-up. The launch and the landing shots provide the requisite parts of the leap but with the intermediate close-up of Golden Swallow's feet kicking-off the bench we are shown exactly *how* she has been able to leap to the balcony. This kick-off shot aids the sensation of realism because it effectively provides an explanation of Golden Swallow's movement through the space. Unlike Drunken Cat she has to climb towards and vault over the railing, rather than somehow dropping down behind it. The extra shot also slightly elongates the time taken to perform the feat compared to Drunken Cat, while the medium shot/close-up/medium shot framing still contracts the actual distance covered.

With the two alternate stylisations of leaping Hu establishes the limitations of his characters relative to each other. This example from *Come Drink With Me* shows Hu's first attempt to immediately contrast the two types of heroic skill and it confirms Bordwell's observation that there are stylistic differences in editing between the feats of greater and lesser heroes (1998: 38). Additionally, because she is shown having to kick-off an object to reach the balcony, it could be said that Golden Swallow's leap is no longer "weightless". Both heroes' martial arts capabilities are exemplified by the stylisation of their leaps: Golden Swallow, a realistic but lesser skilled hero, is *shown* executing her leap via constructive editing that relies on elided match-on-action cuts whereas Drunken Cat, a fantastic and

greater skilled hero, is *not shown* fully executing his leap which is implied through constructive editing that employs ultra elided match-on-action cuts. His action exhibits discontinuity rather than being constructed in a 'straightforward, continuous way' (Bordwell 1998: 38). The dynamic clash between the sudden whip-pan shot and the shot of slow-motion contained in a static frame is visually stimulating but it is not explanatory. Hu does not want to explain how his greater heroes operate so much as he wants to promote their mystique.

In Hu's conception of the *wuxia* world, greater heroes do not always move according to the usual physics of time and space and so their feats are stylised to befit their characters. Discontinuity between the shots helps to create the sensation that these are feats that cannot be perceived by normal humans, and that includes the audience. We can only catch glimpses of their fantastic behaviour (Bordwell 1998: 32-39). However, as we shall see later in this chapter, the advent of CGI has enabled filmmakers to show the skill of greater heroes without cutting or visual implication. It could be argued that the mystique of the *wuxia* hero is lost when the secrets of his skills are shown. The capacity to see an action affords the viewer the opportunity to reject its credibility so by denying the viewer the capacity to properly see the action it cannot be rejected on the evidence provided.

If Drunken Cat's leap contained a kick-off shot similar to that of Golden Swallow's leap we may find it easier to reconcile his action because the kick-off shot is a helpful way to inform the viewer of the *xia*'s action, his trajectory, the force he has applied and the surface that he has found purchase on. In this case Hu has decided that Drunken Cat's skill does not need such overt explanation, as it would detract from his fantastic, magical nature. However the capacity to swiftly insert such

informative detail between shots with a larger shot scale has seen its application in numerous action sequences, even those that convey fantastic skill. Since the implementation of Shaw Brothers' New Era, the kick-off shot has been a popular constructive editing device in the Hong Kong film style. It has been used by many Hong Kong action filmmakers to construct leaping, kicking and leg-pushing actions with a sense of realism. Although it is used by Hu to indicate relative realism between his main heroes, the kick-off shot evolved under the pervasive influence of the pursuit of novelty and has come to be used in the constructive editing of fantastic feats.

The Evolution of Kick-Off Shots

Rapid constructive editing allows for narrative discontinuity because it keeps the mind engaged in the forward momentum of the edit and this continuousness helps to override critical appraisal of narrative inconsistencies. Nonetheless there also needs to be clarity to keep the viewer's mind engaged and an inserted kick-off shot helps to maintain such clarity of action. Amidst a flurry of movement the simple kick-off shot provides vital information. It has the effect of emphasising the force of movement as well as indicating changes in trajectory. A forceful, launching kick-off implies that the *xia* can stay aloft for longer because he has exerted considerable energy to become airborne. When a kick-off shot is inserted during airborne movement it explicitly shows how the leaper is staying aloft or how she has changed direction.

In terms of practicality, the kick-off shot allows the actor to perform the leaping and landing actions independently of each other, which can negate the need for a stuntman. Similarly the kick-off shot also helps to reduce the shot scale of the shots

that precede and follow it. For example there are numerous examples of wide-shot to wide-shot launching and landing during *Temple of the Red Lotus*, whereas Golden Swallow's leap in *Come Drink With Me* shows mid-shots either side of the kick-off. So the potential to maintain visual engagement with the actor's face adds another layer of realistic sensation because the audience can effectively see the actor perform the leaping and landing parts of the action. Consistent engagement with the actor's eyes helps to preserve the connection with the performer and the kick-off shot is commonly very short so that there does not have to be much delay in returning to the visage of the actor if desired.

Initially, the kick-off shot technique was aligned with the depiction of realistic leaping. In *A Touch of Zen* the generic and fantastic sword throwing skill is combined with the weightless leap to double the novelty quotient within one spectacular display. In this combination we see a foreshadowing of the fantastic applications of the technique which will be discussed shortly. In *A Touch of Zen* Hu's villain sacrifices his sword to provide a launching point to scale a particularly tall wall thus combining the capacity of the *xia* to throw his sword and leap long distances [25f].

His pursuer, Miss Yang, finds an alternate launch point [31f].

Evidently the natural laws governing scaling of fortress walls in *A Touch of Zen* are similar to those that we have seen in *The Heroic Ones*; for instance: the villain and Miss Yang are able to surmount small walls with a single leap but the exterior fortress wall is so tall that it requires them to navigate another way over. The kick-off shot is used by Hu as a realistic foil to otherwise fantastic leaps.

Although the kick-off shot began as a method to indicate elevation, Hu was also beginning to realise the usefulness of the kick-off shot to show the *xia* initiating a descending attack. Diving or swooping attacks verge on the fantastic due to the fact that they are often constructively edited from rapid shots which are joined by ultra elided match-on-action cuts and the viewer only glimpses the action. In these sequences the kick-off shot acts as a visual anchor (and a reminder of the real) amidst a flurry of action. In particular Hu uses the kick-off action to pivot an ascent into a descent. In *A Touch of Zen* Hu opts to show Miss Yang's dive from the top of the bamboo without a launch close-up although the long shot which shows her dropping down does provide a good impression of her kicking-off from a bamboo stalk just before the cut [60f].

When Hu staged a similar diving attack for *Raining in the Mountain* (1979) he opted to use a much shorter kick-off shot to instigate the diving strike. By this time, the insertion of a close-up kick-off shot had become a standardised technique [9f].

This shot spans only 9 frames because it isolates the kick-off amidst a flurry of other activity and the smaller shot scale further isolates the significant action of impact and release from the tree. In both of these sequences, the leaping actions of the *xia nu* which surround the kick-off shot are comprised of swiftly cut glimpses of movement, while the kick-off shots themselves provide readily discernible propulsion in an otherwise hectic flurry of movement.

The kick-off shot is not simply used as a visual anchor in rapidly edited sequences; it also provides a useful cutaway to facilitate simpler editing tricks. In *The Magic Blade* (Chor Yuen, 1976) there is a distinct allusion to Hu's diving-attacks, but while Hu took pains to show the *xia nu* jumping in numerous shots prior to the kick-off (thus showing the effort taken to scale to such a height) Chor shows the ascendancy in a single shot. The total leaping action is reduced to three shots. The essential leaping, kick-off and landing shots are shown, as per the *Come Drink With Me* example, but here the *xia* leaps to a greater height than Golden Swallow.

For the wide-shots, either side of the kick-off shot, a stunt-man performs acrobatic leaps from a supple tree branch. One of these leaps is then shown in the old-school reverse motion style so that it looks as though he is leaping upwards.

The cut is made before contact with the branch and a brief kick-off shot is shown instead [13f].

The low, canted angle of the shot gives the impression that Fu Hung-hsueh (Ti Lung) has jumped to a considerable height but this kick-off shot has been filmed from a low position at the base of the tree. The camera is positioned at ground-level, but the speed of the shot does not give viewers time to discern the dis-continuity between heights so much as they observe continuousness of the movement. The three-dimensional plane of action is condensed by the extreme low angle which foreshortens the tree-trunk so that it looks (albeit briefly) like a towering tree and the focus of the lens blurs all but the feet in the foreground. The logical, cognitive interpretation inspired by the constructive editing is that Fu is kicking-off from the same height to which he was jumping in the first shot. After the kick-off Fu somersaults back down.

In this example three separate actions are constructively edited to show one continuous action. The cuts between these three shots are ultra elided match-on-action cuts. The ascent and descent have necessarily been shot separately. The two mid-flight actions require the kick-off shot as a segue otherwise there would be a jump cut between them. The descending backward somersault also needs some explanation so the kick-off shot provides a detailed sense of the physical demands of such an acrobatic feat to provide credibility.

In the *A Touch of Zen* and *Raining in the Mountain* examples Hu's dives are used at the climax of fight sequences where the diving strike kills one of a pair of enemies, but Chor uses the dive as the precursor to a number of other spectacular and more novel events within the fight sequence. The dive itself does not result in the execution of any of the dozens of enemies and because the leap is relegated to the front of a series of stunts and with no apparent reason nor tactical advantage supplied by the height gained (Fu Hung-hsueh leaps back into the group of swordsmen that had surrounded him), Chor's rudimentary presentation of the leaping somersault robs it of more compelling narrative potential. Yet the advantage of the feat is that it primes the viewer for the relative unpredictability of Fu Hung-hsueh within the sequence and keeps her cognitive processes ticking over.

The next example, from *Swordsman II* (Tony Ching Siu-Tung, 1992), shows how rapid constructively edited shots can override the numerous discontinuities contained in the visual information. It accords with Kuleshov's concept that the viewer will make sense of sequential information that is suggested by montage (Bordwell 1997: 33-34; Kuleshov 1974: 54). The total leaping action is presented in a series of six rapid shots, the three basic components – launch, flight and landing – being broken

up to generate a thrilling passage of movement, so that the kick-off shot becomes just one facet of a dynamically constructed action. Ultra elided match-on-action cuts carry the characters across discordant terrain, which is only united by the trajectory of movement. Although the action is finely edited so that the action looks continuous, on close inspection the terrain and action is thoroughly discontinuous. The glimpses of movement in montage convince the viewer of a continuous action.

The action is initiated when Kiddo (Michelle Reis) and Ling Wu-chung (Jet Li) leap over a hand-rail towards the top-right corner of the screen.

The ensuing shot maintains screen direction with a close-up of Ling's hands pressing down as both actors mount the bamboo railing of the veranda [23f].

This 'launch-close-up' resembles the more common kick-off shot and it operates in the same way by showing how Ling propels himself over the rail. It also allows the audience to see Kiddo vault the rail in the background so the action is replicated *within* the shot. At the outgoing frame we can see that her body is fully curled in a somersault.

Although we only get the swiftest impression of this clock-wise rotational motion, a similar motion is replicated by a lone actor in the incoming shot [10f].

Obviously there are numerous discontinuities between these shots: now there is only one actor, he is landing on a thatched surface and furthermore the movement of his body does not correspond with that of the previous shot (nor does it correspond with the ensuing shot). It is the brief impression of movement that is made by this 10 frame shot which is of central importance. The sparse design of the shot enables the eye to concentrate upon the moving body as the feet come into contact with the thatch in the centre of the frame. Because this action replicates the curling action of the previous shot it compounds the graphic impression of the curl and maintains a sense of movement so that the next shot, the kick-off shot, has a greater impact upon the viewer because that familiar, curling motion is halted and a new direction for movement is initiated. As the lone actor's left foot comes into contact with the

thatch, the cut is made. The following kick-off shot (which repeats the action of feet coming into contact with a surface) shows both pairs of feet kicking-off independently of each other: Kiddo's foot (on the left) is already upon the beam at the incoming frame, whereas Ling's are just landing [21f].

Kiddo kicks off and Ling lands.

Then Ling kicks off.

The previous action of the foot coming into contact with the thatch is continued by Kiddo's (black clad) feet as they release from contact with the bamboo beam. Alternately Ling's (white and black clad) feet repeat the full action of landing and leaping. Hence there are two actions being shown: one completing a match-on-action of the landing from the previous shot and the other repeating the landing and leaping action within the shot itself. The repetition of an action compounds the impression of that action and, in this case, reinforces the direction travelled despite other

discontinuities. The continuousness of movement overcomes other visual conflicts (graphic, volumetric, spatial and planar) because the eye is so engaged with the movement itself that it disregards the other discontinuities. For instance, two shots ago Ling was in the lead and now he seems to follow.

In the next shot the bodies are launched into the air in the vertical direction initiated by the kick-off shot. Although the body of Kiddo is ahead of Ling in accordance with the continuity of the previous shot, the continuity is still imperfect because now the bodies are turned away from the hut and towards the camera, but the speed of this shot and the maintained vertical trajectory provide a continuousness of movement which again overrides discontinuity [22f].

Kick-off shots and launch close-ups can unite otherwise discontinuous shots. Key to their success is their clarity of motion, familiarity of motion and, especially, speed. They can present easily recognisable actions very quickly. Within the flurry of action, amid numerous discontinuities, they ground the viewer and clarify the trajectory of the subject body. The kick-off shot provides a visual anchor, a cognisable continuity that overrides cognitive discontinuities.

Although the kick-off shot was initially used to imbue the *xia*'s leap with a sense of realism, the kick-off shot came to be used in more unusual and less-realistic ways. The thorough incorporation of the kick off shot into the Hong Kong filmmakers' stylistic canon, combined with the pursuit of novelty, has resulted in the production of some fantastic kick-off shots that will be outlined here.

Launching Back into the Fantastic

One major deviation from the realistic aesthetic is the use of the kick-off shot to keep the fighter aloft for an extended period of time. Another deviation is the use of improbable surface to launch from. For example, in *Duel To The Death* (Tony Ching Siu-Tung, 1983) the Japanese swordsman, Hashimoto (Norman Chu Siu Keung), kicks-off his own sword in mid-air [7f].


He dives forward.

He then executes another kick-off to remain aloft [13f].

Hashimoto performs this feat three times. When he is beaten down towards the ground Hashimoto kicks-off his sword to gain altitude once more. During their airborne clash the duellists stay aloft for 36 seconds. The sequence is constructed of 66 shots and the average shot length (ASL) is 12 frames. A rapid succession of shots and judicious cutting is used to keep the combatants flipping, diving and rolling through the air. When the swordsmen finally land it is with such great force that a chunk of cliff gives way beneath them, further underscoring the physical power they have invested in their mid-air clash. This combat is wholly fantastic yet there is no visual manifestation of magical power, such as bolts of light emanating from the hands, other than that which is constructed by the editing. The kick-off shot still acts as a foil for the fantasy of flying swordsmen but it is shown in a very fanciful way.

The usefulness of the kick-off shot has meant that it has not necessarily remained a technique which denotes realism and so, in the pursuit of novelty, we find variants upon the kick-off shot which seek to augment the basic vision of feet pushing off from a surface. Multiple mutations of the kick-off shot have evolved. In the Tsui Hark production of *New Dragon Gate Inn* (Raymond Lee, 1992) there are numerous other surfaces upon which inventive kick off shots are staged. Mo Yan (Brigitte Lin) kicks off her opponent's stomach [15f].
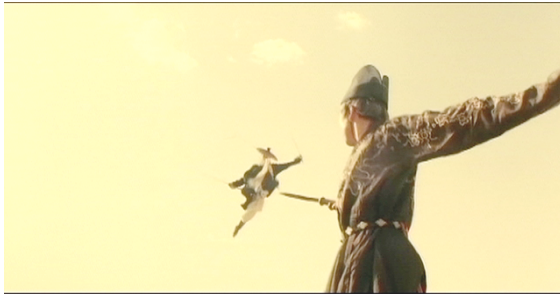
Another fighter kicks-off from the head of a horse [13].

In *Butterfly and Sword* (Michael Mak, 1993) fighters kick off from a thin line of

bunting [14f].

A reverse kick-off shot follows [13f].

In an especially fantastic feat, also from *Butterfly and Sword*, Sing (Tony Leung Chiu-Wai) launches himself like an arrow from his own bow [27f].

As well as finding novel surfaces and objects from which to kick-off, novel ways of providing the initiating spring for a launch without the incorporation of feet also emerged. The broader category of 'launch close-up' must be applied to accommodate this development. In the barren setting of the climactic fight in *Swordsman* (Tsui Hark/King Hu, 1990) the solution to keeping the *xia* aloft is found by using the point of his sword to stay aloft after diving towards the ground in a classic *wuxia* manoeuvre [36f].
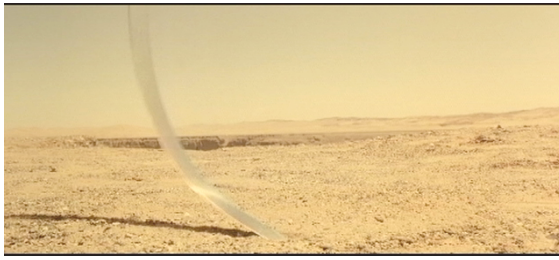

The blade slashes through the dirt.

In *New Dragon Gate Inn* the relative weight of the *xia nu* and the resistance of her sword is realised in a launch close-up when Mo Yan's blade does not penetrate the

desert sand but flexes instead to provide a recoil for her launch [23f].

In *Hero* (Zhang Yimou, 2002) the novelty of the feat is augmented by locating a duel in the middle of a lake so that swords merely dip into the water yet keep the *xia* aloft [21f].
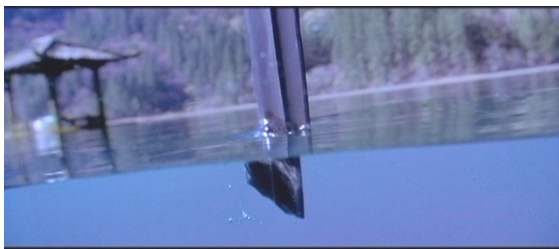
There is no slashing or flexing of the sword to give a physical explanation of how the *xia* might stay aloft. This launch close-up is wholly fantastic. From kicking-off the legs of an upturned table to using a sword to stay airborne the inserted kick-off shot has evolved.

The swooping dive is one of the *xia*'s traditional attacks, indicating profound martial arts skill. That this fantastic feat has been combined with the kick-off shot (an indicator of realism) should come as no great surprise. Since King Hu's initial expansion of the genre's style with his more detailed constructive editing the launch close-up, epitomised by the kick-off shot, has become a regularly utilised technique for linking shots of airborne movement. As shown by the progression of the previous sword-launch examples, even novel launch close-ups have been developed and enhanced until they no longer resemble the physical realism that they were first employed to imply. Generic fantastic feats will inevitably be combined with

successful and enduring techniques in the pursuit of novelty. Novelty guides the oscillation between fantastic and realistic types of action.

Additional Novelty Increases the Duration of Kick-Off Shots

As well as finding new objects from which to kick-off and ways to launch there have been developments in the staging of the launching action. This includes kick-off shots that include more than one kicker, as in the following example from *Hero*, as well as shots that include more than just the kick-off action – such as in the subsequent example from *Seven Swords*. In these instances the characteristic brevity and small shot scale of the kick-off shot is necessarily compromised.

A significant advantage of the kick-off shot is that it can maintain the viewer's connection with the actor right up until the substitution for the stuntman in the flying shot. Kick-off shots also aid the covert use of wirework by eliminating awkward looking take-offs and landings. In the Golden Forest fight sequence of *Hero*, Zhang Yimou realises the importance that the viewer places on seeing actors engage in a stunt by preceding his kick-off shot with a mid-shot of his actors. In the outgoing frame, as they bound upwards, Flying Snow (Maggie Cheung) is exiting screen-left with Moon (Zhang Ziyi) in close pursuit.

The mid-shot allows the viewer to see both actors' eyes before the cut is made. Then a dual kick-off from a tree trunk is used as a segue to explain how Flying Snow and

Moon get from ground level to the treetops. The slow-motion kick-off shot shows

them consecutively connecting with the same tree trunk and launching from it [81f].

The relatively long duration of this kick-off shot is something of an anomaly within

the genre. When Miss Yang kicked off the bamboo in *A Touch of Zen* the shot

spanned 60 frames because it also included her swivelling action in a long shot.

Aside from that shot the average shot length of the 16 kick-off shots and launch close

ups examined in the previous sub-heading is 19 frames. In the *Hero* example the

kick-off shot is much longer than most but here the comparatively long time span is

explained by its maintenance of the scene's leisurely tempo and by being rendered in

slow motion. Furthermore it includes the passage of *two* people kicking off

consecutively, rather than simultaneously as in the *Swordsman II* example outlined

earlier in the chapter.

Flying Snow and Moon ascend to the following extreme wide-shot which shows

their spectacular leap across the treetops.

This wide shot accommodates the use of wirework, conceals the visages of the

stuntmen (who are better trained to perform the requisite leaping actions) and

spectacularly presents the extremely lofty height of the heroines' flight that has been

justified by the kick-off shot. The kick-off shot both masks and justifies the

ascension of the fighters from ground-level to the canopy of the forest.

Hero is a *wuxia* film with a decidedly fantastic aesthetic, yet the pursuit of novelty

means that variation on the staging of the kick-off shot are also evident in films that

aspire to an aesthetic of realistic action too. During the second fight sequence of

Seven Swords Tsui Hark uses two medium framed kick-off shots to show how Fu

(Lau Kar Leung) leaps to a higher vantage point. Both shots incorporate other actions

and are framed in mid-shot to accommodate those actions. In the first shot Fu fends

off the bladed shield which has been thrown at him [57f].

He proceeds to kick off from the back of his horse.[12]

An overlapped match-on-action cut is made to the following wide shot which repeats

Fu's leap from horseback. It shows Fu swinging around a pole on the left of screen

and the *mise en scène* is organised so that the space in which he is swinging is

uncluttered while the Lieutenants and their horses occupy the right of screen.

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[12] It is interesting to note that this shot reinvents the kicking-off a horse stunt that occurs at the beginning of *Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain* and recalls the kick-off shot from *New Dragon Gate Inn* mentioned earlier in this chapter.

By the outgoing frame Fu has swung around the pole and has begun to tuck his legs in.

The cut must be made at this point so that we do not see the actor come to a halt. A second kick-off shot acts as a pivotal insert to continue the leaping movement. An elided match-on-action cut is made to the second kick-off shot and the incoming frame showing Fu as a figure from a low angle beginning to leap into action [30f].

Kick-off shots are commonly used to segue from one difficult action into another. In this instance the editor cuts on the moment of the body tensing to a shot which begins with a body being released from tension. This effect enables us to perceive some actions as continuous due to our expectation that a tensing of the muscles will require those muscles to be promptly relaxed – even if that is into an improbable resumption of action. Fu immediately kicks-off even though the actor has not swung into a position which would enable him to perform such an action.

This kick-off shot is then interrupted by a Lieutenant who pursues Fu with a leaping overhead slash.

The incursion of the Lieutenants into both kick-off shots evokes a sense of peril not usually associated with the technique. A stylistic advance shown by the construction of these three shots is that kick-off shots can contain more than one action, but in doing so a concession has been made to a looser framing and an increased duration. In the second kick-off shot a concession is made to include the slashing movement of the attacking Lieutenant and so a match-on-action cut cannot be made with deference to Fu's movement as Fu exits the frame. The incoming shot returns to the high-angle camera position but now with a slight reframing to best present the leaping action. The action begins with an overlap of the Lieutenant's slashing motion while Fu ascends towards a small roof-like structure.

The subterfuge of these shots is that now Fu is ascending with the aid of wires but his swing around the pole would have negated this wirework action, or at least it

would have made the stunt a lot more difficult to execute. So the second kick-off

shot provides an opportunity to cut so that the stuntman can be harnessed for the

leaping shot. In this case, the maintenance of the camera position appeals to a sense

of realism. Despite having to take time to harness the actor, the opportunity to

reframe has not been taken. As a result the shot appears to respect the integrity of a

single take. Given that Tsui is renowned as a director who, in Bordwell's words,

'will always demand yet one more shot from a different spot' his decision *not* to

reframe shows remarkable restraint (2000: 142-143).

The kick-off shot is emblematic of the Hong Kong action film style. Hong Kong

filmmakers' familiarity with the technique has seen them make numerous, novel

variations upon the central premise which is based upon extending the temporality of

the leap and the generation of a sense of realism. We have seen that this familiarity

has also resulted in the kick-off shot being employed for fantastic feats too.

Additionally, its visual impact and the provision for clarity amid rapid, frantic cutting

have seen the technique become widely employed for its effectiveness.

The usefulness of the kick-off shot's visual description of the physicality of leaping

has since seen it readily incorporated into Hollywood films. Yuen Woo-ping made

use of it when he was the action choreographer for *Charlies' Angels* (McG, 2000),

which exhibits Hong Kong style. When swinging from a red drape Natalie (Cameron

Diaz) kicks-off to change her direction [15f].

It has also been incorporated into Western graphic novels, such as *Promethea* by Alan Moore and J.H. Williams III where it is used to describe the relatively clumsy (but effective) jump of a lesser heroine (1999/2000).

The detail of the kick-off provides a visual explanation that makes the feat understandable, especially in the context of the lesser skilled character. Later in *Promethea* the greater, more powerful heroine is able to soar and fly without the need for kick-off frames. This graphic distinction between heroic types mirrors the distinction between the lesser (more realistic) and greater (more fantastic) heroic leaps of *Come Drink With Me*.[13]

Constructive editing can be used to convey many types of action both realistic and fantastic. However, with the advent of CGI, these actions can be delivered without

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[13] These Western examples further indicate that the Hong Kong action film style is readily being adapted at a global level and reinforces my argument that the Hong Kong style can, and should, be more thoroughly identified so that the origins of such techniques are fully appreciated.

the need for cutting. Nevertheless, when CGI is used to convey human performances with some realism, cutting can be a very helpful tool to keep the action believable.

The Suspension of Disbelief: Wirework and Computer Generated Imaging

CGI has permitted the modern reinvigoration of classic *wuxia* content. Mythical creatures, akin to the giant animated eagle from *The Swordswoman of Huangjiang* (Chen Kengran, Zheng Yisheng, Shang Guanwu 1930) and the eagle-suited actor from *The Furious Buddha's Palm* mentioned earlier in the chapter, have returned with contemporary stylistic aplomb. For example, compare the relatively unsophisticated giant snake puppet from *The Battle Wizard* (Hsueh Li Pao, 1977) with the CGI fire-beast in *The Storm Riders* (Andrew Lau Wai-Keung, 1998).

Although it contends with the problem of unrealistic weight dispersal, wirework has been especially enhanced by CGI. Compared to building and animating mythical creatures or lightning bolts of *qi*, erasing wires is a simpler task. Because of this development we find that wirework aided weightless leaps are now performed to greater extremes since the visibility of wires is no longer such a restricting issue.

Wires no longer have to be as carefully concealed as they were in previous eras. Ang Lee exploited this new freedom in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* when he paid homage to the bamboo forest fight sequence in *A Touch of Zen*. In the pursuit of novelty Lee sought to exceed Hu's limitations and raised the fight above ground and midlevel to set the majority of the fight in the upper levels of the forest's canopy. So rather than applying the sense of realism that the cumulative visual reasoning of constructive editing generates, Lee sometimes elected to allow his characters to appear to float in defiance of gravity. Lee was recasting a New Era scenario in the style of the *fantastique* Cantonese *wuxia* film with the aid of CGI. The pursuit of novelty then sees Zhang Yimou exceed Lee to raise the wirework in *Hero* above the forest canopy, which we have just seen. Zhang also sets a fight upon a lake rather than having his heroes incidentally skip across it on their way to other areas, as Lee did in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. The novelty of using wirework over water is further developed with the use of an underwater camera to present extraordinarily novel views from a submerged position:

Although CGI can be used to erase the wires during wirework-aided feats, the use of wirework is still relatively problematic. The combination of wirework and CGI in *House of Flying Daggers*, *Hero* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is not necessarily visible, but it is apparent. When a body is lifted from the ground there can often be an identifiable dispersal of weight as wireworkers take the strain and the actor accommodates for their weightlessness. The reverse can be said for lowering a

body to the ground when the body appears to regain the weight it lost in the air. In *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Ang Lee, 2000) the unrealistic dispersal of weight is visible in the bamboo forest duel between Li Mubai (Chow Yun-fat) and Jen (Zhang Ziyi) where the torsos of either actor appear to be suspended at a fixed height but their legs dangle below them. The actor's body and clothing will often provide tell-tale signs that indicate their levitation is not unaided. Despite the diegetic world of the *wuxia* film allowing for weightless levitation – such indicators of technique will probably look quaint to future generations of movie-goers as they look awkward even now, but judicious cutting can help to alleviate these problems.

One solution might be to not allow the viewer to see the actor launch or land when wired so that she cannot see the dispersal of weight. Another might be to ensure that there is conflict between the speed of launching, flight and landing shots to produce dynamism that commands the viewer's attention. Both of these solutions can be applied at the same time. In *House of Flying Daggers*, as Mei (Zhang Ziyi) leaps across the soldiers' shields, we know that she is being suspended by wires that have been erased using CGI. Mei's leaping rise is displayed in a slow-motion shot.

She rises in a steady diagonal direction, pulled higher by the wires, until the technique can no longer be sustained. A cut is made to a new shot where she spins and lands atop the shields in real motion.

The tranquil nature of the first shot is jolted by the temporal collision in the second shot, inducing a dynamic, rhythmic burst. This is a reversal of the dynamics of the collision between the whip-pan and Drunken Cat's slow motion drop in *Come Drink With Me*. The temporal collision adds dynamism to the feat but by using the slow-motion shot *before* a real-motion landing shot, the constructive edit can generate a distinct impression of impact.

Bryan Chang has also noticed this effect and points out that in Lau Kar Leung's *Mad Monkey Kung Fu* (1979):

> Hsiao Hou, in one of the fights, performs a set of martial action that ends with an evasive tumble. When he is airborne Lau decided to use slow motion, returning to normal speed when he drops back on the ground. (2006: 19)

This technique reflects and confirms Eisenstein's theory that greater impact comes from greater collision between shots (1957: 49). In this case it is the collision between shot-speed that generates a sense of sudden acceleration and gives the landing a bone-jarring impact. This kind of collision between shots is an excellent way of conveying the sensation of sudden impact with the ground to the viewer and so it is a technique that has endured.

Though it does not reflect a literal realism, this technique has been used to give a realistic sensation of the event. The escalation of affect takes precedence here over a realism of depiction.

In addition to the temporal collision between shots there are performance-based factors that aid the sensation of realism in the physicality of Mei's landing. In the second shot Mei is still wearing wires but the action she has to perform is singularly vertical. This means that now there is only one direction that the wireworkers need to contend with (rather than both lateral and vertical movements as in the previous shot). She also does not have to drop especially far before coming to rest.

Just as the reverse-motion leap of the silent era was eventually cut into two shots to create a more dynamic vision of the feat that alleviated the apparent and familiar non-realistic movement of the actor, the combined use of wirework and CGI is cut to alleviate similar indications of physical falsity. In the *House of Flying Daggers* example constructive editing is not used to construct the weightless leap in its entirety (as that action is predominantly shown within the first shot) but it is relied upon for the transition between two actions that would be extremely difficult to perform realistically within a single shot. Even though CGI technology provides filmmakers with recourse to create wholly unedited and completely fantastic actions they still regularly rely upon editing to provide visual dynamism. Similarly the kung fu film genre, which has eschewed fantastic martial arts action, also employs constructive editing for its stimulating capacity, despite this being an indicator of unrealistic martial arts performance.

Kung Fu: 'Real Fighting' Versus the Flying Kick

Paradoxically, although the original use of the kick-off shot (as seen in *Come Drink With Me*) provided a realistic explanation for leaping to unfeasible heights, it became an indicator of unrealistic action during the rise of the kung-fu film. The integrity of

the athletic performance was a key attraction for the kung fu film and so cutting was minimised to prove the authenticity of the martial arts performance. Yet the exciting cognitive process that is encouraged (and somewhat controlled) by rapid constructive editing could not be easily dismissed and it was used to present feats like the flying leap. The kung fu film has typically rendered leaping or jumping so that it is incorporated into combat manoeuvres rather than occurring as a lone feat. The flying kick is an attenuated version of the weightless leap and better suits the diegetic framework of the kung fu film.

The dichotomy between athletically performed martial arts feats and those constructed through editing techniques, compounded by the dichotomy between realistic and fantastic presentation of martial arts, has consistently provided an impetus for change within the Hong Kong film style. The drive towards the filmic presentation of authentic martial arts materialised in Hong Kong during the late 1940s when Kwan Tak-hing's Wong Fei-hung films were produced in reaction to the relative unauthenticity of the *wuxia* film. The kung fu genre not only challenged but overtook the popularity of *wuxia* film and subsequently influenced the *wuxia* film style. Teo has argued that the distinction between the genres should be based upon the presentation of combat rather than the trappings of period costume or the use of weaponry, saying that:

> Kung Fu's emphasis was on "real fighting," a concept that was meant to counter the tradition of supernaturalism in *wuxia*, and was reinforced by the involvement of actors who were genuine martial artists (as typified by Bruce Lee) rather than those unschooled in actual fighting skills and merely mimicking the motions (2003a: 24).

When kung fu films came to prominence in the 1970s the cyclic shift between fantastic and realistic feats swung further toward real fighting and martial arts

athleticism, which conveyed an aesthetic of physical authenticity. Just as the New

Era directors used constructive editing to reinvent fantastic feats in a realistic

manner, the kung fu genre sought to replace constructed skill with the transparent

depiction of athletic skill. To use constructive editing in the presentation of such

feats would now diminish the authentic athleticism of the performance. This new

objective meant that martial arts practitioners had to be employed in significant

acting roles and the best presentation of their skills affected production processes.

Martial arts choreographer Han Yingjie has delineated the difference between

working in the two genres saying that:

> Working in a swordplay film is definitely easier, since with all the props and
> period costumes you only have to go through the motions to give the
> impression of fighting. But a kung fu film is real fist and leg work,
> especially since clothes are cumbersome, the actors would strip to the waist
> when they fight. You really have to put in 100% to appear authentic. (Lau
> 1996a: 216)

The prioritisation of authentic athleticism encouraged a transparent film style, which

enabled the audience to view bouts of martial arts, which were less likely to be

interrupted by cutting. Lengthy takes incorporating multiple manoeuvres served to

authenticate the skill of the actors whilst wide framings enabled unimpeded

perspectives of combined leg and fist work.

Even more recently, authenticity has been invoked as a primary attraction in Prachya

Pinkaew's Thai kung fu film, *Ong Bak* (2003), where the promotional tag-line ('No

computer graphics. No stunt doubles. No strings attached.') is both a staunch

rejection of special effects and a validation of the martial arts skill of the lead actor,

Tony Jaa. The film style in *Ong Bak* is geared towards affirming this guarantee and

many of Jaa's stunts are replayed *in toto* from a number of different angles so that

temporal continuity is disregarded in favour of asserting the authenticity of the

performance.[14]

Constructive editing may have become an indicator of manipulative filmmaking that compromised (or created) the skill of the martial artist, but the attraction of airborne feats was undeniable. Bordwell has suggested that constructive editing was retained in the kung-fu genre because of its capacity to isolate and present the details of acrobatic action in a riveting manner (2000: 214-217). Toward this end Bordwell has analysed a constructively edited flying kick from *King Boxer* (Chung Chang-hwa, 1972) to assert that '[t]he impossibility of presenting this fight in a long shot has been turned to advantage: obligatory artifice has yielded artistic emphasis' (2000: 217). Furthermore I suggest that the construction of this particular flying kick is also a bi-product of the pursuit of novelty. I will show that the *King Boxer* flying kick, described by Bordwell, is modelled upon the showdown flying kick of *The Big Boss* (Lo Wei, 1971), which had appeared one year earlier. I will not repeat Bordwell's description of the flying kick action in *King Boxer* but it should be noted that the edited construction of the launch, strike and landing are almost identical in either film. Analysing the original flying kick of *The Big Boss* I will mention the deviations in *King Boxer*'s shot assembly.

During the final fight sequence of *The Big Boss*, Cheng Chao-an (Bruce Lee) duels with the Boss, Hsiao Mi (Han Yingjie), and delivers a flying kick to the Boss' face in mid-air. As in *King Boxer* the action is neatly symmetrical. In the first shot the Boss crouches and rises.

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[14] When Jaa leaps through a barbed-wire hoop the authenticity of his stunt can be affirmed because this is a feat that cannot be facilitated by wirework and constructive editing has provided no recourse to harness the actor.

In the second shot he jumps into the air.

Cheng performs the same actions from the reverse angle.

The assembly in *King Boxer* truncates this action by showing only one shot of each combatant leaping into the air, which has the effect of enhancing the speed of the action by indicating that both men have launched at almost exactly the same time.

A wide two shot then shows both men in the air as they approach each other. It is significant that Cheng, with his leg outstretched, is higher than the Boss because this shows his advantage and that his skill exceeds the Boss' skill.

To give an impression of the height that the two fighters have achieved a tuft of foliage has been used to dress the bottom of the frame implying the canopy of surrounding trees. A similar effect is created in *King Boxer* by having the combatants occupy the top half of the screen while seated onlookers occupy the lower half of the screen. Despite both Lee and Han's own martial arts expertise, jumping to such a height is an impossible feat. So constructive editing is used in an attempt to convince the audience that in the diegetic world of the film it is possible for these fighters to jump so high. Achieving such height is narratively important because earlier in the film the Boss exhibited his phenomenal jumping skill so as to impress his power upon his minions. That Cheng can surpass the Boss is testament to Cheng's own prowess as shown in the next shot – a close-up of the Boss' face as Cheng's foot comes into contact with it.

This is not a kick-off shot but this exclusive close-up stresses the impact. At this point in the *King Boxer* assembly, the action is enhanced by the additional inclusion

of a punch. Thus the hero of that film exceeds the dexterity of Cheng by doubling the number of hits inflicted upon the villain. Novelty is also increased by the inclusion of the punch shot within the constructively edited action, yet this inclusion also begins to show how the increase in novelty can cause a decrease in realism. The flying kick is a real martial arts technique that has been enhanced and exaggerated by constructive editing. The punch doubles the spectacular quotient but it also begins to stretch the apparent realism of the action.

As both men drop from the sky there is a return to the wide-shot.

As is the case in *King Boxer* only the ungainly descent of the defeated fighter is shown while the hero's landing remains unseen. So the Boss drops through the shot.

In *King Boxer* there is the additional acrobatic enhancement of the defeated fighter turning a somersault as he falls. Also, the impact of the landing action is further enhanced by the addition of a second shot to show him crashing to the ground. So *King Boxer* improves upon the dynamism of *The Big Boss* by reducing the number of shots to show the launch but doubling the number of shots used to show the strike and the landing.

Having dropped into shot the Boss then rises into frame, dazed and shaking his head. He looks off-screen to the left. A fresh wound is now visible just above his eye.

An eye-line match prompts a reverse shot of Cheng looking back over his shoulder and the men are now on opposite sides to where they began.

Cheng's eye-line match informs us that he has continued along the trajectory of his flying-kick to land opposite the Boss. The construction of the spectacle favours a narrative that confirms the hero's skill by focussing upon the downfall of the villain.

As in *Come Drink With Me*, the greater fighter of *The Big Boss* is shown to have greater leaping skill, which wins him the fight. Although authentic action is highly valued in the kung fu film, in this example it is not an authentic action that determines the ultimate victor. Despite the period's proclivity for an aesthetic based on martial arts realism, combat was still stylistically enhanced by the application of dynamic film techniques. Constructive editing is used in *The Big Boss* because of its capacity to render an impossible action and because it is a dynamic, mentally stimulating technique. As shown in the previous chapter, the construction of

impossible action through a rapid succession of shots forces cumulative cognitive processes while denying the viewer much time to analyze each shot.

Despite championing performance authenticity, kung fu films frequently exhibit techniques that are intended to have a direct and dynamic impact upon the viewer. Along these lines, the next section on palm power shows how a *qi*-based feat is transformed into a kung fu styled feat that directly confronts the viewer with a palm attack directed into the camera. Examination of this technique will further show that the quest for realism is regularly undermined by the pursuit of novelty.

PALM POWER: DYNAMIC IMPACT TRUMPS INVISIBILITY

Transformations of Palm Power

In the following section we will see how palm power has been reinvented to have direct impact upon the viewer. The depiction of palm power is loaded with stylistic and symbolic significance and represents a fantastic channelling of *qi* power. It is often shown as energy issuing from the hand of the caster but it has also been presented as a more literal stylisation of *palm* power without the visual representation of *qi* force. In these instances an actor directs her attack into the lens of the camera to have a direct impact upon the viewer.

In early conceptions of palm power (in both film and illustration) flying swords are often shown in conjunction with the projection of *qi* force from the palm. During the initial transition of the genre from literature and opera to film, the casting of magical swords had been depicted with painted swords emanating from the outstretched palm

of the caster. *Burning of the Red Lotus Monastery* (Ming Xing Film Company, 1928) provides an example of this effect.
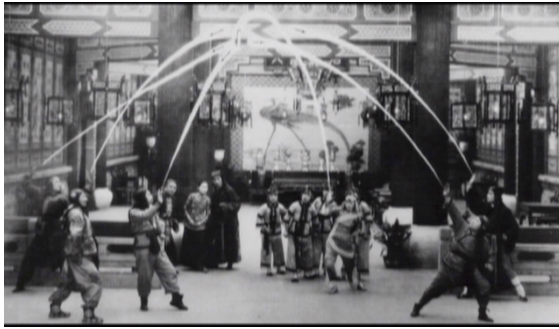
The representations of flying swords and palm power have since been split into two distinct fantastic feats, so the following section specifically examines the development of constructive editing in relation to the flying sword. This is not to say that both types of feat no longer occur together but rather that the stylisation of these feats is more readily understood when analysed separately.

When presented with the enhancement of visual effects, palm power is an inherently fantastic feat. The capacity to shoot bolts of energy from the hands is unrealistic and is more commonly presented in *wuxia* films that embrace their requisite fantasy than those that try harder to present aesthetic realism. Yet there have been attempts to represent palm-power in ways that try to approach realism by excluding the visual representation of energy. One example of this type of reinvention occurs in the New Era film, *The Twelve Gold Medallions* (Cheng Kang, 1970). This is the same shocking action that startled our Western reviewer in chapter 1.[15] We see a villain take a blow to the chest.

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[15] Costner, Tom (15 April 1971) 'One Wonton, Two Eggdrop', *The Village Voice* quoted in Leyda 1972: 469.

This causes blood to trickle from his mouth in a manner familiar to *wuxia* viewers.

But as he slides down and out-of-shot, the camera tracks in to a bloody palm print that is revealed on the post behind him.

In the pursuit of novelty the filmmakers have stacked a novel and pseudo-realistic rendering of bloody palm-power on top of a more familiar technique – the ubiquitous dribble of blood from the side of the mouth. The escalation of novelties here becomes more fantastic with the revelation of the palm print. This example does not use constructive editing yet it appeals to the New Era period's sense of realism as palm-power is represented through blood-work rather than through a visible, magical *qi* force. But, although blood-work was initially used to represent the gore of real combat, it now becomes incorporated into a more fanciful feat. When novelty can be applied, it will be applied. Similarly, when new technology can be used to reinvigorate the stylistic presentation of a feat, it will be used.

Stylistically the means by which the graphically enhanced *qi* force emanates from the palm of the caster is often determined by technological developments that enable novel ways to present the familiar feat. Technological advancements often encourage a return to spectacular, fantastic aesthetics that can exploit such technology with modern stylisation. For instance, in Hsueh Li Pao's *The Battle Wizard* (1977) palm power is rendered with light based visual effects that were the height of film technology at that time.

With the advent of CGI a new technology is put to work to present fantastic spectacle in such films as *The Storm Riders* (Andrew Lau Wai-Keung, 1998).

This example of Cloud's (Aaron Kwok) palm power incorporates one of the stylisations of palm attack that became popular in the mid 1960s – the direct attack into the camera.

Attacking the Viewer

One way of transforming palm power so that it no longer had a magical component but retained (if not enhanced) the physical *power* expressed by the palm attack was to direct that action at the audience. By staging an aggressive attack from the

foreground plane into the lens, the filmmaker draws attention to the spectacular action while at the same time including the viewer within the space of the action. For example, in *The Dragon, The Phoenix* constructive editing is used with the intent to have an impact on the viewer by directing punches toward the viewer during the climactic fight between two combatants. Lau and Tong position the camera analytically into the space of the action when one combatant (the adoptive father) punches directly into the lens. The following shot then shows the recipient of the blow reeling backwards. By staging the action in such a way they seek to have a direct and startling impact upon the viewer because they put the viewer in the position of the victim. The use of this technique is indicative of the New Era style in that it seeks to place the viewer within the area of melee combat rather than as a spectator. But, while the direct attack into the camera contains no fantastic visual effects, its contravention of realism is through the use of a technique that directly engages and involves the viewer.

King Hu's approach to camera positioning confirms the desire of Hong Kong directors to make a distinct impression upon the viewer and to involve them in the action. Hu's dictum was: '[t]he audience is the camera. I don't want the audience to sit and watch, I want it to move' (Teo 2002a). This idea of moving the audience with the action is integral to understanding the Hong Kong film style. The in-camera, constructive system of production is designed to give the viewer an optimum perspective of the action and Hu's intention to sweep the viewer into the action is indicative of that aim. In fact he also adopted the technique of staging an attack into the camera in *Come Drink With Me*. During the fifth fight sequence Drunken Cat despatches a bandit with a palm to the face.

A very brief shot is used to show the hand rushing at the camera [7f].

Is this Eisenstein's 'Cine-Fist' cutting into the skull of the spectator? Not quite. In this case this effect is used for entertainment, not for the agitation of Revolutionary ideas. However it does have a stimulating and physiological effect upon the viewer that resonates with the Soviet desire to have an impact upon the viewer. It also contrasts with the continuity system editor's desire to keep the cut invisible. Whereas Murch sought to hide the cut by anticipating the blink response, this type of cut *forces* a blink response by suddenly filling the frame with the attacker's hand.

Hu then adds further novelty to the action by inserting a frontal reaction shot which puts the viewer in the position of the attacker. So not only is the viewer first put in the place of the victim, she is then put in the position of the attacker. This editing choice enhances the power of Drunken Cat's attack by showing the palm thrust's resolution as the bandit recoils.
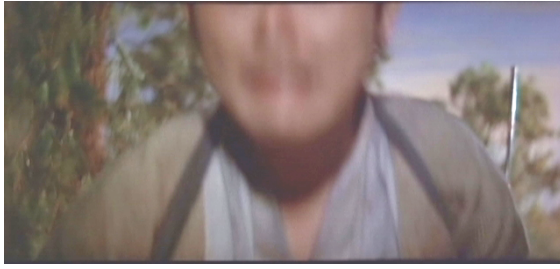
He jerks backwards from the frontal close up and nearly drops out of frame, grabbing at his face.

Because the camera placement situates the viewer within the space of the action and because the direct attack produces a physiological effect (the blink) it is a technique that has endured despite being an overt and noticeable manipulation of the film medium.

The direct impact technique is also used in *Iron Mistress* (Sung Chuen-Sau, Taiwan, 1969), but here it is not indicative of greater heroic skill because it is a villainous Mongol captain who repels a hero [6f].

In this instance the reverse-shot does not allow the viewer to appreciate the strike on the recipient from a frontal point-of-view.

Unlike the *Come Drink With Me* example where the viewer was afforded a frontal view of the bandit recoiling, the viewer is now denied the point-of-view reverse-shot of the hero recoiling because it would align her with the minor villain's perspective. In this case the filmmaker has chosen to show the hero reeling backwards with the strike, as the wound he receives to the chest will cause a significant change in the direction of the plot.

Although relegation from an heroic to a villainous feat (in the same was as the coin toss of Chapter 2) might indicate that the novelty of the overt spectacle of directly thrusting a hand at the viewer has worn-off, this is not necessarily the case. In fact King Hu uses this technique during the transcendental climax of *A Touch of Zen* (1971) to show how the Abbot Hui Yuan (Roy Chiao) delivers a dizzying and (ultimately) mortal blow to his counterpart, Hsu (Han Yingjie). In this instance Hu incorporates a Buddhist gesture to deliver the blow so that the palm strike comes from the side of the hand. In this way Hu imprints the underlying Buddhist narrative of the film upon the forehead of evil Hsu as well as directly upon the vision of the viewer. However it should be noted that although Hu began filming in 1969, the same year as *Iron Mistress* was released, *A Touch of Zen* was not released until 1971, so the argument that the direct impact technique was not relegated to lesser characters does not necessarily hold up to chronological enquiry. Yet the technique was not abandoned.

Since *The Dragon, The Phoenix* the technique of thrusting a palm into the camera has been attenuated to fit contemporary fight sequences. In *Dragon Tiger Gate* (Wilson Yip, 2006) a henchman is repelled by Dragon Wong (Donnie Yen) whose palm dominates the screen as the henchman recoils backwards [19f].

Both actors begin in shot and the camera does not take the place of the target so a frontal assault is not made through the screen. Although the out-turned palm calls to mind a direct attack into the lens, it is simply an evocative prelude to the second more forceful, double-handed strike that actually does engage the viewer directly. Dragon Wong summons his *qi* and thrusts both palms at the camera, looking directly into the lens [17f].

This direct attack into the camera recalls the previous two-handed example from *The Storm Riders* though the only visible indication of *qi* force here is the wind buffeting Wong's hair, rather than CGI effects. This forceful double-palm attack is used to

explain how Wong spectacularly repels a multitude of henchmen with one strike, sending them through a wall. The action is shown in three shots: firstly a shot to give the sense of the three dimensional space Wong is clearing around the doorway, then a shot showing men flying through the air and lastly a shot from inside the room into which they crash. These shots all serve to emphasise the force of Wong's attack even though, on close inspection, he has made no actual contact with the henchmen.

The edit then returns to the hero shot of Dragon Wong as his *qi*-pulse subsides [37f].

Because the hands do not obscure the lens, the emphasis here is not on forcing the audience to blink but to present the hero in a way that emphasises his power and to present the star in a glorious close-up. Donnie Yen is a star performer with proven martial arts prowess which is authenticated during other combat scenes of *Dragon Tiger Gate*. This is a contemporary kung fu film which utilises CGI and constructive editing to present fantastic kung fu combat and so Wong's attack into the camera is acceptable within the diegetic framework of the film. *Dragon Tiger Gate* does not demand solely authentic kung fu. Instead there is a balance between feats of actual and constructed martial arts skill. By showcasing both the performer's martial arts skill and the filmmaker's skill with film technique there can be a greater range of spectacular techniques. The intent is to astound the viewer on both fronts.

The depiction of palm power depends upon the diegetic framework of each individual film and whether or not that framework supports the use of visual effects

to represent the *qi* force. Because it confronts the viewer, the direct attack into the camera is not necessarily a more realistic way of showing palm power either; it just conforms to a different conception of realism. It also has useful applications, such as forcing the viewer to blink (as in the *Come Drink With Me* and *Iron Mistress* examples), including the viewer in the display of visual effects (as in *The Storm Riders* example) or even to simply display a star performer for the audience (as in the *Dragon Tiger Gate* example). From a fantastic feat that was observed at a distance, palm power became a physical attack directed at the viewer, but the absence of a visual *qi* force doesn't mean that it is any less overt.

As demonstrated by the example from *Burning of the Red Lotus Monastery* at the start of this section, palm power was associated with the feat of casting flying swords. In the final part of this chapter I analyse the flying sword half of the equation and demonstrate the cyclic development of the depiction of projectile weapons within the *wuxia* film. The use of constructive editing to create this feat has been integral in making the action appear more realistic than shot-contained special effects such as the painting of negatives in the *Burning of the Red Lotus Monastery* example. Toward this end the ultra-elided match-on-action cut has been regularly deployed to depict the use of projectile weapons. Such editing presents a swift process of action and result that relies upon being immediately cognized and, at best, wholly believed by the audience – or, at least, being retrospectively understood by the viewer seeing the resultant shot wherein the projectile hits or misses the target.

At the start of this chapter I used the example of the *xia*'s weightless leaping ability to show how audience expectation resulted in the development of more sophisticated constructive editing to convey the feat with a realistic edge. Just as Chang's arrow-

ladder in *Tiger Boy* and the grappling hooks of *The Heroic Ones* recast the weightless leap through constructive editing with more grounded physical laws, in *A Touch of Zen* (1971) we will see that Miss Yang's (Xu Feng) dagger throwing expertise re-invents the *xia*'s ability to cast flying swords without necessarily discarding the superhuman skills of the *xia* but by recasting swords as daggers and presenting the action in a neat, constructively edited manner. However I have also suggested, like Pierson, that technological advancement has prompted the use of long shots that showcase CGI (2002: 123-4). In this case we will also see that the development of CGI has caused the feat of casting flying swords to return to a shot-contained action event.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF FLYING SWORDS

The Flight of Projectiles: A Seen and Unseen Feat

As has been demonstrated throughout this chapter, technological advances have influenced the evolution of the *wuxia* film style. With such advances come new ways of depicting old, outmoded feats to provide novel reinvigoration of the genre's fantastic attractions. Bazin's notion of the periodic fluctuation of realism is reinforced by this development as is the observation made by Reisz and Millar that old techniques are shed when their over-familiarity provokes audience perception of cinematic falsity. New technology provides new ways to show action with increased believability.

As the New Era emerged, evoking a greater sense of realism, a flying sword would be replaced by a simple throwing-dagger or dart. The throwing action would be

236

shown in two consecutive shots rather than in a single, paint-enhanced shot as we saw earlier in this chapter in the example taken from the early film *Burning of the Red Lotus Monastery* (Ming Xing Film Company, 1928). Darts, for example, are prevalent in *Temple of the Red Lotus* (Xu Zhenghong, 1965) a film that was amongst the early but unsuccessful attempts to instigate the New Era style and in this film the flight of a dart is displayed across two shots. The action and result is edited into two consecutive shots – the first shows the throwing motion.

The second shot shows the dart already lodged in the target.

Unlike Zatoichi throwing the die into the bottle in the example set out in chapter 3, here only the first part of the projectile's flight is shown. The elision of the remainder of its trajectory does not show the dart in flight or piercing the victim. But by cutting to the agonized reaction of the target, his response serves to make the audience think that the throwing action has caused the reaction. In this case: the viewer has seen the *xia nu* make a throwing motion and has then seen the reaction of the victim with the shaft of the dart protruding from his bloody eye socket, so her cognitive reasoning adds the second shot to the first to assume that the *xia nu* has thrown the dart into his eye. The actors accentuate and enhance the action by giving expressive performances.

Later in the New Era, Hu's *A Touch of Zen* (1971) shows the act of throwing daggers into a target in a series of three shots that also includes the flight of the projectile. In the first shot Miss Yang (Xu Feng) makes a throwing motion.

The second shot consists of a blurred whip-pan from right to left - maintaining screen direction [16f].

The cut to the reaction shot is still made after the moment when Yang's daggers have lodged in her target. The actor recoils in such a way as to suggest that he has just been hit [34f].

This is the second time Yang throws daggers and the fifth and last time projectiles are shown during the bamboo forest fight sequence. Before Yang throws her daggers her companions fire arrows at the soldiers. The order and shot design of these five projectile attacks is as such:

1. Release/Flight/Result (Soldier dodges arrows)
2. Release/Flight/Result (Soldier dodges arrows)
3. Flight/Result (Soldier dodges arrows)
4. Release/Result (Soldier dodges daggers)
5. Release/Flight/Result (Daggers strike soldier)

The first two instances establish a release/flight/result pattern but in the third and fourth instances Hu subverts the pattern and omits the release and flight shots respectively. Hu deviates from the pattern and in this way he generates suspense and novelty by keeping the action unpredictable.

Hu favoured novel reinvention rather than replicating an editing pattern. This fits the pursuit of novelty as it applies to the progression of action within a fight sequence. Once a technique has been shown, its novelty has worn off and therefore the technique must be altered should the same type of feat be revisited. Both Hu and Tsui apply this logic to their films and they reconfigure their editing patterns and techniques to maintain novelty. Tsui's escalation of technical novelty will be addressed in relation to the presentation of different projectile effects in the following chapter. Hu's escalation of technical novelty will be subject to more scrutiny here. The level of his dedication to novelty becomes apparent on closer examination of the measurement of the whip-pans in *A Touch of Zen* and, subsequently, in *The Valiant Ones* (1975).

The frame measurement of the whip-pans in the bamboo forest sequence in *A Touch of Zen* is: 10, 11 (launched arrows missing targets), 10 (arrows without a release shot) and 16 (Yang's successful dagger throw). Although the ASL of 11.75 frames tells us that the shots are very quick, it is interesting to note that Hu lets the last and most significant whip-pan remain longer on screen (but it is still a very fast shot).

The flight of the daggers is given an extra few frames that prolong the duration of the viewer's lack of focus. Like the palm thrust into the camera the whip-pan suddenly restricts the viewer's capacity to focus. The last whip-pan has the effect of 'blinding' the viewer for a slightly longer period of time. Combined with the unpredictable pattern of the two previous projectile attacks, this blinding has the effect of giving more impact to the postponed execution of a soldier by prolonging the viewer's blindness for a longer duration than has been established in the previous whip-pans. After the suspense of the procession of unsuccessful projectile attacks there is, finally, a resolution that is favourable to the heroes and favourable to the cognitive processes of the viewer who has been anticipating this outcome but has been thwarted by Hu's editing choices until now. Hu uses the whip-pan as a dynamic device that could have a stunning effect upon the viewer. The forced loss of vision means that shots placed after the whip-pan come into stark relief for the eye that is searching for definition.

In chapter 3 I suggested that visibility can be controlled for dynamic effect and here we can see that impact is prioritized over clarity. More explicitly, the momentary loss of clarity indicates a strategy of restricting the viewer's knowledge for the generation of impact. Just as there is impact inherent in a slow-motion fall cutting to real-motion landing there is a similar collision between a blurry whip-pan and a static result shot. The result-shot of the soldier being struck is a momentary pause which is brought into stark focus by the restriction of focus and the preceding burst of the whip-pan flight-shot.

Hu enjoyed this technique of constructing projectile flight and he used it again in *The Valiant Ones* but he also applied slight modifications to give the technique further

novelty. In *The Valiant Ones* the flight of arrows is presented in the same release/flight/result manner but there are slight variations to the way that the action is staged. After the scene where Yu Dayou (Roy Chiao Hung) and his Adjutant (Lau Kong/Liu Chiang) plot the Japanese pirates' ambush on a 'go' board, a fight sequence ensues which contains three flights of whip-panned arrows.

The duration of these whip-pans is 9 frames, 13 frames and 10 frames respectively. The ASL of 10.66 frames used in this sequence is slightly shorter than those in the *A Touch of Zen* whip-pans. The first flight of arrows is shown in the same release/flight/result manner as in *A Touch of Zen*, but the 9 frame whip-pan is faster. Given that Hu paid close attention to the frame lengths of his shots, the first whip-pan is a good preliminary indication that projectile flight in *The Valiant Ones* will be treated to enhanced novelty. This does not end with increased speed though as there are also significant variations to the staging of the release/flight/result pattern. For instance, the comparatively longer duration of the second 13 frame whip-pan is due to the fact that it is part of the same shot in which the arrows are released from the pirates' bows.
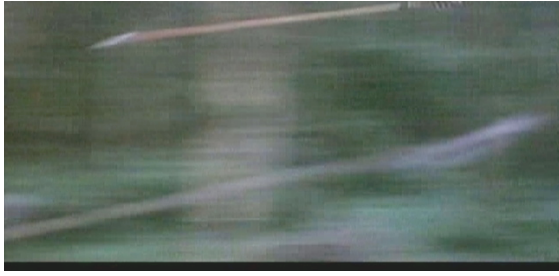
Here we see Hu altering his technique to achieve extra novelty. However it should be noted that this alteration of the strategy is not readily discernible at regular speed and so the viewer is not necessarily aware of the lengths to which Hu has gone to provide such novelty.

Close examination of the *third* whip-pan flight shot shows that Hu opts to have the arrows travelling in the opposite screen direction to the release and result shots. The screen direction established by the release shot is right to left yet the arrows travel left to right during the whip-pan and the result resumes the initial right to left trajectory. The effect is subtle and the blur of the whip-pan still essentially obscures the viewer's appraisal of the flight of the arrows, relying mainly on the dynamism of the moving camera, but the reversal has a curiously jarring effect.

These slight variations to the three shot whip-pan projectile pattern indicate that Hu was not content to simply re-use the editing patterns that he had established but to experiment and re-design them in his own pursuit of novelty. Although the variations are barely discernible when played in real-time, each variation has a subtle effect on the viewer that makes each instance unique.

Compared to the example from *Temple of the Red Lotus* and its single shot flying swords, Hu's intervening whip-pan provides an impression of the flight of the projectile. It also extrapolates the time between release and result, which not only

gives an impression of speed, but also implies the projectile travelling over a distance without revealing specific detail about that distance. This is an advantage to the director who wants to give a greater sense of physical realism to projectile flight. I've also established that the brevity and blur of the whip-pan causes the audience to momentarily lose focus so that the result, the apparent piercing of the target, appears to the re-focusing eye as having more impact. So the technique has the twofold advantage of lending physical realism while delivering dynamic impact. In this way it is similar to the collision derived from the slow motion fall cut to a real motion landing.

Hu does not overcome the problem of presenting the moment of impact and it remains an essentially unseen event. Impact is still a novelty to be achieved. With the advent of the zoom lens, camera operators found a new way to give an impression of the flight of the projectile without having to include a whip-pan insert and impact could be created by a reverse motion technique. An example of this will be seen in the following section.

Piercing the Target

Both the whip-pan and zoom methods can give an impression of the flight of projectiles. Yet their construction still elides the actual piercing of the target, which remains an unseen event. In chapter 2 we saw stop-motion used to show coins lodging into a target. The example from *Come Drink With Me* employed a prompting reaction shot in place of a flight shot which helped to elongate the supposed time of the flight, yet this and the other examples were not accompanied by a flight-shot.

To show the piercing of a target some filmmakers used reverse-motion.[16] The effect was achieved by pulling the projectile out of the target with a length of fishing line and then playing the action in reverse so that it appears to pierce the target. An example of this effect can be seen in the Shaw Brothers/Harbour (US) co-production of a western/kung fu film, *The Stranger and the Gunfighter* (Antonio Margheriti, 1975). This example features a reduction in the number of shots used to depict the release/flight/result pattern by combining a rapid zoom-out with the reverse-motion technique in two consecutive shots. The rapid zoom out happens at the same time as Ho Chiang (Lo Lieh) makes a throwing motion which gives an impression of speed and flight.

The next shot shows the knife pinning down a pistol.

The piercing effect is achieved by a combination of pulling the knife out with fishing line and playing the shot in reverse-motion. By dressing the shot with sticks and reeds the fishing line is well hidden.

The collision between the extreme blurred movement of the rapid zoom and the static, detailed close-up creates an effect similar to that of the whip-pan to static shot combination. By zooming the viewer away with the throw, the camera movement delivers a sudden and violent shock to the viewer that imbues the action with a greater dynamism than cutting from one static shot to another static shot. Even though achieving the piercing of a target with reverse motion is an ingenious and realistic solution to the problem, the sensation of the action is heightened by the collision of conflicting action between the shots. However, the contemporary application of CGI means that the release/flight/result pattern of the projectile attack can be contained within a single shot. Because of this there is no real need for editing, as discussed in the following section.

Computer Generated Imaging: A Return to Un-Cut Spectacles

All of the heroic feats addressed in this chapter (the weightless leap, palm power and the casting of flying swords) have undergone considerable reinvention over the years and, as such, they prove Bazin's notion that ideals of realism periodically fluctuate. Chang Cheh's notion of the *wuxia pian* as a cyclic genre that oscillates between the presentation of fantasy and realism is also confirmed. The advent of CGI has enabled *wuxia* filmmakers to re-invent some of the generic fantastic elements that had lost favour during the periodic cycles that championed realistic action. CGI has also enabled the presentation of new, wholly fantastic feats such as the use of a drop of

water as a deadly projectile during the fight on the lake in *Hero*.

CGI feats frequently resemble silent era feats because spectacular action is displayed within the shot rather than as a result of the collision of detail that occurs between shots. Pierson has identified the tableau framing and long takes of the CGI event as an invitation for contemplative viewing of the subject (2002). It can also be said that by showing a spectacular feat within a single shot the audience is not forced to rationalise a sequence of shots, as they would during a constructively edited feat. The temporal and spatial ellipses provided by editing are no longer required to depict a physically impossible feat because technology is available to the filmmaker to be able to show the spectacular event in full. Because CGI visual effects can wholly depict fantastic spectacles without recourse to cutting, the genre has come full circle with a return to a film style that opts to show impossible action completely rather than relying upon editing to construct it. Just as audiences once saw the uninterrupted animated leap of the *xia nu* in *The Swordswoman of Huangjiang* we have seen uninterrupted CGI leaps in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers*. Similarly, CGI can make the release/flight/result of a projectile a wholly shown and, therefore, seen event. When Mei (Zhang Ziyi) first throws a dagger in *House of Flying Daggers* (Zhang Yimou, 2004), the action is shown in a relatively long take and in slow motion.

Mei throws the dagger, which flies from her outstretched hand.

The CGI enhanced dagger remains the focal point of the shot as the camera pulls back and executes a 180-degree tracking movement until the target, a government soldier, comes into frame on the left of screen.

As the dagger closes in on the soldier the camera falls behind. The speed of the dagger is ramped up as it races away and becomes a smaller focal point. The dagger pierces the soldier's throat with a decisive squelching sound.

Although it is a spectacular execution of the projectile feat, this shot also has a significant bearing upon the narrative because it establishes the accuracy and skill of the supposedly blind *xia nu*. Despite a seventy-six year gap between *Burning of the Red Lotus Monastery* and *House of Flying Daggers*, both films opt to show the flight of the blades as a stylistic priority rather than implying flight through inserted whip-pans or other editing techniques.

Stylistically the dagger shot recalls bullet sequences in *Charlie's Angels* (McG,

2000) and *The Matrix* (Wachowski Brothers, 1999) that were, in turn, influenced by the 'bullet-cam' of Ringo Lam's *Full Contact* (1992). Although the martial arts of these two Hollywood action films is motivated and supported by their diegetic frameworks there is some tension in appropriating the Hong Kong film style. Despite Chang Cheh's belief that there is mutual benefit in the cross-pollination between Western and Hong Kong filmmaking techniques (2004: 133), there is some concern that the authenticity of martial arts action is somewhat devalued when non-martial artist stars like Keanu Reeves and Cameron Diaz perform martial arts feats. Leon Hunt notes that although the rigorous training undergone by Hollywood stars serves to authenticate their action, he also writes that: '*The Matrix* and its many imitators offer worst case scenarios for the future of diasporic Hong Kong action – Asian expertise absorbed into a cinema that continues to marginalise Asian performers' (2003: 181-182).

Although CGI can help a non-martial artist actor to display extreme physical prowess it can also devalue actual martial arts skill. Pondering the future of the kung-fu star, Hunt considers the action sequences of *Romeo Must Die* and resolves that a star's CGI performances must be counter-balanced by more authentic martial arts display so as to validate their actual skill and he writes:

> [Jet] Li had long been the most wired-up of kung fu stars, but the fan response on the internet suggests that [*Romeo Must Die*] was a step too far. If wirework is a bone of contention for some fans, it does at least require performative skill. I suspect that what fans objected to, above all, was the impression that Li had been motion captured and reduced to an animated combo, not so much Jet Li as Nintendo Li. His spine-shattering kick to Russell Wong's skull follows a single shot of both performers taking flight – an initial kick 'repositions' Wong in mid-air for the *coup de grace*. Such a scene would once have only been possible through constructive editing, as in the mid-air kicks exchanged between Lee and Han in *Enter the Dragon*. But such a single-take f(l)ight scene simply looked like a computer game – technology exposed 'Wicked Lies' more than editing ever had. However, *Romeo Must Die*'s most overmediated moment is quickly followed by the

> blinding return of the real – Li's virtuoso use of a firehose as rope dart,
> circling and spinning in a way that only a highly trained physical performer
> can. It would take more than four months' training to get Keanu or Cameron
> to do *that*, and, as yet, technology might 'capture' it but never surpass it.
> (2003: 198-199)

There is still a place for the kung-fu star, more so as viewer familiarity with CGI increases. Familiarity calls the novelty of technique into question and so the tableau framing, long takes and motion capture of the CGI event become emblematic of an outmoded style.

Should CGI 'draw attention to technique and disturb the illusion of reality', as Reisz and Millar noted of silent era devices such as iris shots (1977: 45-46), then it could well fall into disfavour and become used with less regularity. Although it seems unlikely that such a versatile technique will be abandoned, CGI is no longer a novelty and overt aspects of the presentation of CGI are being shed. Some filmmakers, such as Tsui Hark, have actively sought to attenuate its presence in their films. In *Seven Swords* Tsui dilutes the presence of CGI by pulling it into line with other film-crafts so that rather than being a primary attraction it becomes one of the ensemble crafts that are used to represent the feats of the *xia*. Compared to *House of Flying Daggers*, *Hero* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* the action in *Seven Swords* is rendered with greater deference to a sense of realistic action and with attempts to keep its wirework and CGI invisible. In *Seven Swords* Tsui is not as ready to manipulate shot-length or frame size to accommodate the use of CGI; instead he manipulates CGI to fit the action and does not compromise the dynamic cognitive process that is inspired by rapid constructive editing. Tsui's endeavours show that although the novelty of technologically advanced techniques trumps concerns about realism it is the waning of novelty, as technology becomes familiar,

which prompts its abandonment. We have seen this occur with the diminished use of rapid zooms after a period of thorough exploitation of the technique.

In *Seven Swords* Tsui uses a number of different techniques to depict the use of projectile weapons (some of which are discussed in chapter 5). In the third fight sequence he evokes Hu's use of the whip-pan but replaces it with a static insert that shows a projectile's flight. He also employs subtle use of CGI to show the effect of the weapon upon its target. In this case it is a grappling hook wrapping around the neck of Wu Yuanyin's donkey. Wu rides her donkey into a clearing where she encounters one of Fire Wind's Lieutenants who is seated on horseback. He asks her if she has seen a wounded man and she responds by starting to turn her mount around. But the Lieutenant will not let her go and their combat is initiated in a close up of the Lieutenant's mid-riff as he flicks his cloak aside, reaches to his hilt, grabs a coiled chain and makes a throwing motion.

The next shot shows the flight of the projectile but unlike the whip-pan there is no camera movement and so the flight is framed in a static shot of the creek-bed reflecting the chain as it uncoils. Aesthetically it still resembles a whip-pan as it is a muted and partially blurry shot. But the static frame, combined with the gentle movement of the water and out of focus reflections, is a far more tranquil rendering of projectile flight. The flight of the object - although it is reflected – is made more visible in this context because of the nature of the weapon, and the chain effectively indicates the left-to-right flight path of the grappling hook.

In the result shot Tsui uses a CGI recreation of the grappling hook and chain to show it wrapping around the neck of the donkey.

The result is not a piercing, but still confirms contact with the target within the shot. The movement of the donkey's head and the rider falling behind helps to distract the eye from the CGI too. Tsui downplays the use of CGI to make it a more subtle effect that is tempered by brevity and so becomes just another component part of the total action film style rather than a spectacle in and of itself.

Because contemporary audiences are alert to CGI they can also be critical of its application. This is a fate common to many special and visual effects. Thus Tsui's efforts could indicate that the cycle of the *wuxia* film will swing towards filmic realism once again. This is despite the capacity of CGI to convey complete actions, such as the release/flight/result of projectile attacks. With the success of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* the cycle of the *wuxia* film oscillated towards a film style which utilized CGI to present heroic action and yet the subdued use of CGI in Tsui's *Seven Swords* indicates a return to a style of realistic action that is facilitated by constructive editing. In Tsui Hark's endeavours to find a new way of presenting

action that appears un-choreographed, we are seeing a cyclic return to more realistic action sequences (Gravestock and Walsh 2006).

This chapter has investigated the development of the weightless leap, palm power and the casting of flying swords to determine that the stylistic priorities of the *wuxia* film oscillate between realism and fantasy, but that this practice also allows the genre to flourish. Although this chapter has confirmed Bazin's observation that there are periodic shifts in the appreciation of realism (or fantasy) it has also shown that the filmmakers' pursuit of novelty, a desire to have an impact upon the viewer and the application of new technology, tends to override the maintenance of realism.

In the following and final chapter of this thesis I provide an in-depth analysis of the first fight sequences from King Hu's *Come Drink With Me* and Tsui Hark's *Seven Swords*. In both films the directors grapple with the issue of presenting realistic fighting. These analyses will demonstrate how the pursuit of novelty and the stylistic reinvention between realism and fantasy affect the assembly of shots within Cheuk Pak-tong's concept of the staircase formula.