CHAPTER TWO

of

CUTTING ACTION

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

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2. CHAPTER TWO

THE PURSUIT OF NOVELTY:

AN AGENT FOR A CHANGING FILM STYLE

The Hong Kong film industry has fostered a culture of display that encourages filmmakers to use fight sequences as moments to express their mastery of film-technique and martial arts choreography. Hong Kong action filmmakers' craftsmanship is fastidiously focussed upon the presentation of novel cinematic action and theirs is an industry in which audacious spectacles thrive. This is the legacy of many years of studio competition where it was considered a matter of business to discover another studio's subject matter and to trump them by releasing it first (Lent 1990: 107). Thus action filmmakers have been engaged in a competitive pursuit of novelty, which prompts experimentation with filmmaking techniques in their attempts to bring the most daring spectacles to the screen. Action choreographer Tony Ching Siu-tung confirms the competitive mind-set, saying:

> Whether in cinematography, storytelling or action choreography we must strive to be better than anything that has been done before. We must exceed the audience's expectation'.[1]

Unfortunately the drive for spectacular excellence has become a debilitating problem for stuntmen and a number of fatalities have occurred as a result of stuntmen pushing the limits so as to not lose face with their bosses. At the seminar accompanying the 2006 HKIFF's 'Tribute to Action Choreographers' Stephen Tung Wai reported that

[1] *Hero* DVD Featurette: Stanley J. Orzel *Hero Defined*, 2002.

the cost of personal insurance for a stuntman in Hong Kong was higher than that of a fireman or policeman (Gravestock 2006b). In mainland China, 2008, six crew members were injured and a stuntman was killed in an explosion on the set of John Woo's *Red Cliff* (Grossberg).

The pursuit of novelty pervades the *wuxia* film. It is an impetus for stylistic evolution. From the initial transformation from stage to screen in the 1920s, to the reaction against its fantastic content in the New Era of the 1960s, through the kung fu film's demand for "real fighting" and into the CGI era, the *wuxia* genre has acquired and shed many filmmaking techniques. The drive to re-invent martial arts film aesthetics is an ongoing process. During the recent production of *14 Blades* (Daniel Lee, 2010)[2] its director confirmed that it must be up-to-date in order to be 'watchable':

> What is important is for the movie to have a contemporary feel. It should not feel like martial arts movies produced in the 1970s. If so, it will not be watchable. It should not resemble Hu Jinquan[King Hu]'s movies. It will be contemporary in aesthetics, martial arts, treatment of the script, and outlook towards life. (HKfilmart.com 2009)

Although they can convey modern outlooks and deal with contemporary social concerns, *wuxia* narratives do not change as much as the stylisation that is used to present them. It is largely style that gives generic stories their novelty. This does not mean that these highly stylised stories are then devoid of narrative content; instead the ways in which spectacles are presented can indicate narrative progression. Style can convey narrative intent. Later in this chapter this statement will be clarified by the analysis of the ways in which three different filmmakers handle the same action event – the tossing of coins. It will also be supported by an assessment of the

[2] A "Bond-esque" martial arts film set in the Ming Dynasty.

meaning associated with weaponry within the *wuxia* film. Filmmakers must find ways to answer various conflicting imperatives within the *wuxia* genre. Primary conflicts that I have identified are between convention and novelty, as well as between credibility and spectacle. Filmmakers are constantly searching for new ways to negotiate these potential contradictions.

The chapter is structured in the following way. The first part considers ways in which narratives can foster combat spectacles and looks at how the diegetic framework of a film has an impact upon the credibility and development of its allowable spectacles. The chapter then turns squarely to the pursuit of novelty as an agent of change by analysing the impact of the pursuit of novelty on two types of spectacular event (blood-work and the tossing of coins) to show how Hong Kong directors adapted Japanese techniques to generate the kind of combat realism that was demanded in the New Era. This prompts an analysis of the way that spectacular action events are organised according to Cheuk Pak-tong's Staircase Formula (1998: 58-59), which, in turn, prompts an analysis of the way that familiar character types can be organised in opposition to provide novel combat scenarios. The last section then analyses the impact of new technology upon the pursuit of novelty by briefly investigating the zoom lens. I will show how the maligned rapid zoom can be highly effective in the hands of experts despite the fact that it has become synonymous with overt stylisation.

APPRECIATING ACTION

Narrative and Novelty

There are a number of ways to ensure that a narrative will require the displays of combat that provide opportunity for spectacle. Revenge narratives, protection (of school, family and friends) narratives and tournament narratives abound because they necessitate conflict. Within such narratives there are ways to provide new and novel combat. Chang Cheh has noted that different martial arts fighting styles keep the action fresh and he credits 'dynamism' for the reason that '[l]ocal action films have never ceased evolving to maintain its vigour and freshness' (2004: 131). Many filmmakers have subsequently set assorted styles against each other to keep their fight sequences intriguing and dynamic. For example there is a swathe of 'versus' films based upon the appeal of seeing Shaolin-derived martial arts in conflict with other disciplines: *Shaolin vs. Manchu* (Lee Chuen Chun, 1980, Taiwan), *Shaolin vs Lama* (Lee Tso Nam, 1981, Taiwan), *Shaolin vs. Ninja* (Robert Tai, 1983, Taiwan). The *wuxia* genre has also presented different martial arts disciplines in combat; for instance, in *Duel to the Death* (Tony Ching Siu-Tung, 1983) the Chinese *xia* fights Japanese ninja and samurai.[3]

One notable way of varying combat style has been to depict disabled characters. For example the protagonist of the Japanese Zatoichi films is a blind swordsman, which makes his uncanny capacity to skilfully defeat opponents a novel and awe-inspiring spectacle. The novelty of the disabled hero is carried over into Hong Kong films via Chang Cheh's *One Armed Swordsman* (1967) where the eponymous hero is

[3] Many other films have featured unusual fighting styles to provide novelty – such as the Drunken Fist style popularised by Jackie Chan in Yuen Woo-ping's *Drunken Master* (1978).

dismembered and must develop a wholly new fighting style based around having only one arm.[4] Eventually both of these novelties are paired off when a one-armed hero fights a blind villain in the tournament narrative of *Master of the Flying Guillotine* (Jimmy Wang Yu, 1974). Thus the successful novelty of the disabled fighter became a familiar character type and the two types of attraction are combined to double the novelty quotient. The pursuit of novelty dictates that this successful type of novelty should be thoroughly exploited and so *The Crippled Masters* (Joe Law, 1979, Taiwan) manifests the spectacular novelty of actual disabled fighters in combat.

The manipulation of narrative to facilitate such spectacles as disabled fighters or bouts between unusual martial arts styles might seem to add credence to Pierson's notion of a dichotomous split between spectacle and narrative (2002: 123-4) but this would under-rate the ingenuity of Hong Kong filmmakers. They have shown that a fight can contain narrative content even if that content is not expressed through dialogue but through gesture and action instead. By using combat to direct narrative, the martial arts film genre simply tells spectacular stories. Leon Hunt observes the difference between martial arts and musicals to reinforce the extent to which spectacles are integrated into the narrative design of the martial arts film; Hunt writes: '[t]he tension between narrative and 'number' (performance/fight) does not generate the same diegetic tension in the martial arts film that it does in the musical

[4] Later, Chang realised he could raise the novelty quotient even higher by increasing the number of heroes in one film and could further vary the combinations of combatants without relying upon one actor. He subsequently delivered such films as *The Deadly Duo* (1971), *Heroes Two* (1974) and *The Savage Five* (1974). In Chang's *The Five Venoms* (1978) each fighter's unusual style reflects the movements of the animal after which they are named: Toad (Lo Meng), Snake (Wai Pei), Centipede (Lu Feng), Scorpion (Sun Chien) and Lizard (Philip Kwok). Four months later the Venoms (with Chiang Sheng replacing Wai Pai) appeared in Chang's *Crippled Avengers* (1978) in which they play disabled fighters. Thus Chang returns to the disabled fighter novelty that shot him to fame, but here he multiplies it for added novelty. *Crippled Avengers*, in turn, prompted *The Crippled Masters* (Joe Law, 1980), which starred a group of real disabled actors and the film's alternate title, *Return of the 5 Deadly Venoms*, indicates an obvious attempt to cash in on the real Venoms' celebrity.

… it is always easier to 'motivate' a fight scene … than people bursting into song' (2003: 25-26). Yet there are certain ways that combat must be expressed to be credible within martial arts genres.

To be effective, the kind of display being presented must be consistent with the diegetic framework of the film. The Hong Kong film style is showy but an overtly showy style still requires motivation. For example Leon Hunt noticed that in *Romeo Must Die* (Andrzej Bartkowiak, 2000) the extravagant use of wirework and CGI to produce a 'technologically complex and yet breathtakingly silly' combination of manoeuvres pushed the limit of acceptability for Jet Li fans:

> *Romeo Must Die* alienated some viewers … by failing to locate its fantastic spectacle within a coherent diegetic world. When the *Matrix* and *Charlie's Angels* 'downloaded' Hong Kong dynamics, they generated self-contained worlds to motivate their hypermediated fight scenes - one cyber-digital, one retro camp - but *Romeo Must Die* had no such narrative frame. *The One* on the other hand, is a science fiction fantasy, in which it makes 'sense' for Li to float weightlessly, move at hyperspeed, and crush a motorcycle cop between two Harley Davidsons, one in each hand. (2003: 199)

Although the CGI and wirework in *Romeo Must Die* enable Li's character to be shown performing fantastic maneuvers, without the diegetic world supporting such spectacles the viewer is alerted to the incongruity of the special effects.

The diegetic world of the *chambara* film does not require nor prompt the kind of quasi-magical skills that are compulsory in the *wuxia* film – in fact they would be out of place.[5] Our expectations about the narrative framework that a type of action film

[5] When the Toho company sought to add novel drawcards to their long-running Zatoichi series, they called upon popular fighters from other films. First they brought in Kurosawa's Yojimbo (Toshiro Mifune) for film number twenty – *Zatoichi Meets Yojimbo* (1970) and in film twenty-two – *Zatoichi Meets the One-Armed Swordsman* (1971), Jimmy Wang Yu reprises his role as the disabled *xia*, Fang Gang. The duel with Yojimbo adheres to the usual realistic style of the samurai film while the appearance of Fang Gang gives license to include such super-heroic feats as scaling a vertical cliff-face in one jump. The film is set in Japan and therefore only the *xia* seems to perform quasi-magical actions which further highlight the theme of his alienation from Japanese society at large.

will provide prompt important responses that will determine whether we will accept certain techniques or whether our sense of reality will be offended. Here is the conundrum: the *wuxia* film permits the hero to perform fantastic feats yet filmmakers cannot rely upon established stylistic conventions to present action because audiences also expect novelty. Hence, directors intend to astonish the audience with audacious and *unexpected* displays that challenge previous stylistic design whilst presenting conventional, *expected* types of feat.

The next two sections analyse the way that Hong Kong filmmakers attempted to exceed the presentation of spectacle that they had enjoyed in the Japanese *chambara* film. It shows how the pursuit of novelty impacts upon the presentation and construction of action with analyses of two different types of action event. The use of blood was an indicator of realism that came to be used to extremes while the parlour trick of the tossing of coins was relegated from an individual feat to one that was combined with other feats within the space of a few years because it became out-moded and directors found new ways to impress the audience.

A Foreign Influence

Seeing the success of the samurai films in Hong Kong, Shaw Brothers hired Japanese filmmakers and sent their own filmmakers to Japan to learn advanced techniques (Lau 1996b: 203). Shaw Brothers also actively encouraged their filmmakers to adopt the film style of these popular foreign imports so as to produce less theatrical work. The *Zatoichi* films are readily cited as a source of inspiration for the filmmakers who were about to embark upon the Shaw Brothers' campaign to revitalise the *wuxia* film

(Lau 1996b: 214).[6] Because the samurai genre does not facilitate fantastic, magical action within its diegetic framework its representation of dexterous action was an ideal template for *wuxia* filmmakers seeking to establish a more realistic rendering of otherwise fantastic feats. When Shaw Brothers announced that they would overhaul the film style of their *wuxia* films to present more realistic combat, they intended to bring the *wuxia* films up to the cinematic production standard of the Japanese samurai films. In fact they sought to match their Japanese counterparts as reported by scriptwriter Qiu Gangjian:

> We wanted to emulate what Kurosawa has achieved. For instance, when we saw the ending of *Sanjuro* [1962] and *Yojimbo* [1961], we'd say, "That's the effect we want!" I think we were preoccupied with dramatic effects and didn't think enough about the narrative as a whole, character development and relationships. (Lau 1996b: 209)

Although Qiu had his reservations about narrative cohesion, the New Era filmmakers certainly learned about the capacity to heighten the impact of a spectacle by generating suspense before it. In particular Kurosawa's *Sanjuro* (1962) established the idea that a climax is more impressive when there has been significant delay leading up to that inevitable strike. This was also a key element of the Zatoichi films and it became adapted by *wuxia* filmmakers who found that by engaging the hero in parlour tricks, where he expresses his skill and deflects attacks without drawing his sword, suspense is generated while the inevitable clash is suitably delayed. Later in this chapter we will learn how the Staircase Formula affects the deployment of such tricks but the most obvious attraction of the *Sanjuro* climax is the spectacular (over) use of blood. The New Era campaign to depict fighting with more realism meant that fighting had to be accompanied by blood but its novel application highlights the

[6] Shaw Brothers undertook the Hong Kong distribution of the series of blind-swordsman films - beginning with the ninth episode, *Zatoichi Listens With Sword* (Hong Kong title) (Law Kar 2003: 143) and Shaw Brothers' filmmakers were able to preview the *Zatoichi* canon, as well as other Japanese films and were encouraged to remake those films (Lau 1996a: 208).

potential contradiction between credibility and spectacle. Blood-work became a vibrant indicator of the New Era's conception of realism. The next section looks in detail at how blood was adopted but substantially and innovatively adapted by directors of the New Era as a result of the pursuit of novelty.

Blood Red: The Colour of New Era Reality

The bloody duel at the climax of *Sanjuro* had a profound influence on the Hong Kong film style. It affected a reconsideration of the use of blood as well as the development of suspense. The tense stand-off between samurai is suddenly and swiftly resolved when Sanjuro (Toshiro Mifune) cuts Hanbei (Tatsuya Nakadai) down.

Blood violently gushes from Hanbei before he topples into the dirt. The Hong Kong directors' ambition to re-create and ultimately out-do this spectacle turned the Shaw's 'colour *wu xia pian* era' (Lau 1996b: 204) a blood red. One of their advantages was that they were working with colour, rather than black and white film, yet they did not immediately start to present wounds with geysers of blood. Novel though it was, Xu Zhenghong's colourful but simple dripping and pooling of blood in *Temple of the Red Lotus* (1965) was not sufficiently dynamic to be indicative of the spectacular extent to which blood would be employed in the New Era.[7]

[7] Xu Zhenghong claims it was the popularity of *Temple Of The Red Lotus* that convinced the Shaw Brothers to launch their campaign for a New Era of *wuxia* film (Lau 1996b: 204). Indeed the film was released on the first day of October 1965 and the declaration for the New Era in *Southern Screen* was made in the same month.

Shaw Brothers lauded colour as a distinctive feature of the New Era style, and so the prevalence of jets and slashes of blood made red the colour of realism. In 1966, the fight sequences of Hu's *Come Drink With Me* (the first of which will be examined in Chapter 5) feature hacked limbs and arterial sprays, which far surpass *Temple of the Red Lotus* in terms of novelty and quantity. By 1967 blood had become a significant tool for the *wuxia* director to indicate New Era realism and in Chang Cheh's *The Assassin*, Nieh Chen's (Jimmy Wang Yu) white costume provides a canvas upon which Chang paints an extremely bloody demise.

As the genre developed, the use of blood became more extravagant and gruesome as directors found new ways to present violent deaths. In *Duel To The Death* (Tony Ching Siu-tung, 1983) a Japanese monk is decapitated and his head is impaled on a tree branch but he still manages to foretell the hero's death. The evil eunuch (Donnie Yen) of *New Dragon Gate Inn* is skinned alive (Raymond Lee, 1992). As well as *New Dragon Gate Inn,* Tsui Hark also produced other films such *The East is Red* (Tony Ching Siu-Tung and Raymond Lee, 1993) which bears the stamp of his Film Workshop production company. The explosive use of blood in *The East is Red* (and

the other films in the 'Swordsman' trilogy) takes the fantastic use of blood to extremes and there is still evidence of the influence of *Sanjuro*. For instance when Asia the Invincible (Brigitte Lin) is stabbed Yee Kwan Yan (Yen Shi Kwan) uses his 'Essence Absorbing Stance' (a type of palm power) to cause blood to gush from her wound in a torrential manner that recalls the climax of *Sanjuro*.

This bloodbath is a far cry from the blood puddle in *Temple Of The Red Lotus*.

Nowadays, because of the proliferation of blood-based special effects, there is some novelty in *not* using blood effects. Consequently Tsui Hark considerably diminished the appearance of blood in *Seven Swords*. His reasoning for this decision was partly because he knew that censors would insist on re-editing the film if there were too much blood on show, but he also wanted to affect a sense of realism:

> I think it is more realistic that way than when you just put too much blood in the shot. It can become very dramatic in a way. If you don't see blood you somehow imagine that the guy's cut was probably something in your mind rather than just seeing it on the screen. Usually when you see an action movie, blood is almost unavoidable and I think we have seen too much blood. That's why we tried to do it a different way. (2006 Gravestock and Walsh: 127)

In *Seven Swords* Tsui is seeking new ways to present death that do not exploit previously established techniques and so the pursuit of novelty continues. *Seven Swords* does feature some blood-effects but they are far less torrential and unrealistic than had previously been accepted during the New Era of *wuxia* film and onwards. Although the aim of the New Era was to render the action in *wuxia* film more realistic, the pursuit of novelty has seen blood-work become an extravagantly used feature of the Hong Kong film style.

In the mid-1960s the Shaw Brothers' objective was to show 'realistic action and fighting that immediately decides life or death' and so blood, death and, especially, bloody death, came to represent the reality of New Era action (Ho 2003b: 115). However the reality that it represented was only a *redefinition* of the fantastic. The blood itself was an unrealistic fire engine red. The fighting did not immediately determine life or death either. Although the samurai films displayed swift and frequent deaths, mortally wounded heroes, such as Silver Roc (Jimmy Wang Yu) in *Golden Swallow* (Chang Cheh, 1968), do not suffer immediate deaths but still fight on interminably despite massive injuries to which they eventually succumb (Lau 1996b: 204). On the other hand, Silver Roc's opponents are nowhere near as hardy as he is. It is these minions who bear the brunt of Chang's interpretation of the Shaw's plan to show instant death and they immediately die at the touch of Silver Roc's sword. The hero's resilience and minion-villains' fragility are further indications of cinematic pretence.

By the time Chang had established his distinctive style he was bringing to the screen litres of fake blood and unbelievable massacres – little wonder that John Woo (one of

Chang's protégés) also became known for the heroic amount of bloodshed in his films. Such scenes are not necessarily more realistic than previous *wuxia* films, they are just less fantastic, or rather they belong to a different type of fantasy. The ethereal, fairy-like fighting skills and fantastic powers of the *xia* become dominated in the mid-1960s by more visceral and brutal fight scenes.

Directorial decision-making with regard to how to employ spectacular effects is significant. This thesis predominantly looks at *similarities* of technique to form a perspective of the Hong Kong film style. Yet the fact that directors want to differentiate their styles from each other should not go unnoticed. The next section examines the way that the stylization of the constructively edited parlour trick of throwing coins indicates the differentiation between directors' intent. Because style can convey narrative intent, the evolution of this trick also demonstrates how each director uses the spectacle to define character and to determine the parameters of physical reality within their films.

Coin Toss Physics

The adoption of constructively edited parlour tricks in fight sequences is a distinct feature of the New Era *wuxia* films which demonstrates the impact of Japanese film and of the pursuit of novelty, and the treatment of the coin toss is a good example of its development. The proliferation of constructively edited parlour tricks in the second fight sequence of *Come Drink With Me*, for example, exceeds those of the Zatoichi films by sheer volume. Unlike the *chambara* films, in a *wuxia* film there is a

distinct requirement to convey the super-heroic, if not fantastic, skill of the *xia* and therefore multiple, *stacked* skills are permissible and partly required.

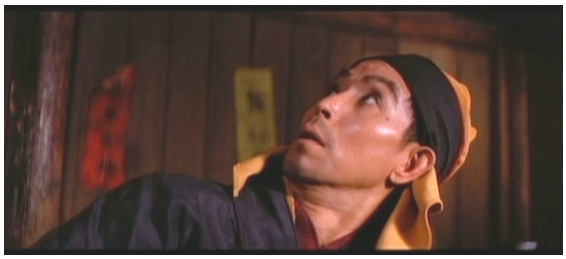
I have established that the *wuxia* film allows for more fantastic presentation of heroic feats than the Japanese samurai film by dint of its diegetic framework. In this section I show how the pursuit of novelty impacts upon the coin-tossing parlour trick as it is pushed to extremes in a series of constructively edited examples from three different films: *Come Drink With Me*, *Golden Swallow* and *The Twelve Gold Medallions* (Cheng Kang, 1970).

In *Come Drink With Me*, when Golden Swallow (Cheng Pei-pei) arrives at an inn she is harassed by bandits and she systematically deflects all of their thinly veiled attacks. In this way suspense is generated by having the heroine display her skill through the use of props and by protracting the time before the inevitable clash of swords. First, they throw objects at her. When they throw coins she pins them to the roof with chopsticks and when they fall back down she catches them in her fan. Next, Golden Swallow uses the coins to spell out exactly who the bandits are dealing with. She throws the coins.

With the aid of stop-motion the coins are shown hitting the wall to form her insignia – a golden swallow [29f].

When Chang Cheh re-invents this feat, in *Golden Swallow* (the sequel to *Come Drink With Me*), he does so with a greater sense of realism and a different stylisation. His protagonist, Golden Whip (Lo Lieh), conforms to Chang's notion of *yang gang* (staunch masculinity) (Sek 2004: 11) and so he lacks the finesse of the heroine. As a result his coin-toss is suitably dynamic but the coins form an unruly non-pattern by comparison. Between the two films this action provides further differentiation between characters. Additionally the techniques that are used also provide a novelty for this familiar feat. The stop-motion effect is replaced with the reaction shot of an onlooker as well as a rapid zoom-in to the coins lodged in the rafters. To start: a close-up of Golden Whip's hand shows him suddenly throwing the coins through the top of the frame.

An onlooker's change in eyeline reinforces the upward trajectory of the coins and the cutaway also omits their flight-time [19f].

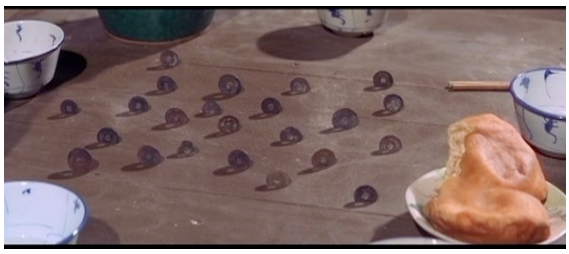


The rapid zoom-in implies the flight of the coins and punches in to give an impression of the forceful nature of the throw [31f].

Compared to Golden Swallow's effort the zoom adds a distinct dynamism to this feat. It shows an early method of implying the flight and impact of projectiles without resorting to stop-motion, which was becoming increasingly outmoded as a technique and one that had been used prior to the New Era, but because of this decision the actual impact of the coins with the wood is not shown. As the wuxia film genre developed, attempts were made to show projectiles in flight and hitting

the target to affect a greater sense of realism (this endeavour will be analysed in Chapter 4). Through his chaotic non-patterning of coins Golden Whip demonstrates his role as a rugged hero, while his position as a lesser skilled martial artist is confirmed when the inn-keeper complains that he cannot get the money down, saying: “It’s too high, I can’t fly!” Golden Whip acknowledges the greater skill of the other heroes, with his retort: “Golden Swallow, Silver Roc can fly”.

Stop motion was still being used with enthusiasm and with some degree of novelty at the start of the 1970s, such as in the following example from *The Twelve Gold Medallions*. However, being relatively out-moded, the technique is obviously relegated to the first of a series of stacked tricks. Now a lowly villain also performs it. A brash bandit tosses a fistful of coins into a tabletop and they land perfectly upright in stop-motion.

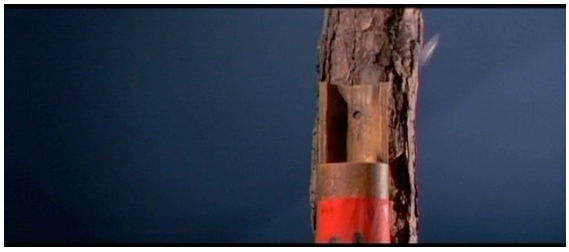


The bandit then challenges the hero to remove the coins. He shows how difficult it will be to do this by clutching a coin between his chopsticks and lifting the entire table off the ground. Then a neat, constructively edited sequence of four shots then shows the hero's rejoinder and his superiority as a martial artist. The hero slams his hand down on the table to send the coins flying through the air.

A close-up shows the coins jumping up from the tabletop. The *xia* must have channelled his *qi* so that all the other items on the table were not upset by his action.

The coins then fly across the screen in the following shot.

Then, in the conclusive shot, they drop into a bamboo container.



This sequence stacks novelties with the stop-motion coin-toss as the opening gambit and the novelties increase from there to form an increasingly fantastic series of constructively edited events. The escalation (or stacking) of novel tricks mirrors the operation of the staircase formula but as applied to the depiction of consecutive actions: the greater novelty is withheld until lesser, familiar novelties have been expended. The staircase formula has proven to be an exceptional organizational tool for Hong Kong action filmmakers who are interested in staggering spectacular action events according to a hierarchy and, as such, it has been used to determine the plotting of films, fight sequences and, as we have just seen, the stacking of parlour tricks.

The Staircase Formula: Organisational Plotting

The fulfilment of the staircase formula means that the narrative must be shaped around regimented combat sequences. Ordinarily there are two opposing forces competing for the upper hand during a fight. But the Hong Kong film industry's pursuit of novelty has seen the development of many permutations of combatants. Fight sequences are the staple attraction of the *wuxia* film and as a result numerous ingenious combinations of combatants have been developed. Likewise it is not always good and evil going head-to-head as, for instance, evil characters might battle for supremacy or alternatively good characters might misunderstand each other and end up fighting. For example in *Zu: Warriors From the Magic Mountain* (Tsui Hark, 1983) two central characters are caught in a fight between three armies and so they pretend to fight each other to escape the battlefield. But, very basically, between the forces of good and evil, there are essentially four combinations of contest:

1. hero vs. villain
2. hero vs. villains
3. heroes vs. villain
4. heroes vs. villains

Various permutations of these types of confrontations are encountered in *wuxia* film narratives. By mixing and matching the combinations of combatant the director can (taking previous films into consideration with the aim of surpassing them) devise unique narrative and character motivations for combat. The pursuit of novelty forces directors to consider unique combat combinations and this inventive drive keeps narratives fresh.

As the *wuxia* film progresses so too does the potential spectacular quotient of the fight sequences because there will be more fights between higher ranked and more powerful combatants. This is an integral process of the staircase formula. Although the opening fight sequence will often provide a great spectacular display – it will not necessarily showcase the ultimate powers of the ultimate heroes or villains because these must be withheld until the climactic fight sequence. The director must figure out how to delay this confrontation and how to stagger spectacles until then.

The final battle therefore represents the director's preference for the most entertaining and/or meaningful combination of combatants. In *The Fate of Lee Khan* (1973) Hu opted to depict option 3 – heroes vs. villain – with a villain so powerful that it requires the unified and concerted effort of a group of heroes to overcome him. Conversely, one of Chang Cheh's preferences was to depict option 2 – hero vs. villains – where a single, highly skilled hero's righteousness and inner turmoil is vented on a legion of villains, such as in *The Assassin* (1967). But, because the

pursuit of novelty encourages persistent reinvention, both of these directors did not use these narrative combinations exclusively.

The Staircase Formula Within Fight Sequences

The assembly of a fight sequence is commonly ordered to favour the requirements of the staircase formula. One effect of the formula upon the assembly is that lesser villains and heroes, and hence lesser manoeuvres are featured earlier in the scene and the greater manoeuvres later in the scene. Cheuk Pak-tong describes the second fight sequence of *Come Drink With Me* to explain the formula at work and to show how both the spectacle and villains' hierarchy is increased in a step-by-step fashion:

> White-eye Wolf, one of the thieves, throws a wine jar and coins at Golden Swallow but all of them are caught by her. The narrative then takes one step upward: a minor gang leader throws coins at Golden Swallow but she pins all of them onto the wall with chopsticks, and collects the falling ones with her fan; another step upwards: the leader Smiling Tiger orders his gang to attack Golden Swallow but they are all defeated. Finally, the Smiling Tiger himself makes a move but he too is defeated and injured. (1998: 58)

This example reveals that another conceit of the staircase formula is the postponement of swordplay, which is withheld until other constructively edited projectile attacks – with jar, bench, coins and chopsticks – have been played-out. By starting as low as possible, with parlour tricks that maintain the veiled antagonism of the bandits, moving on to an outright dart attack and then to swordplay, the formulaic escalation provides a broad dynamic range for action events. These devices effectively withhold the ultimate spectacle of clashing swords – a tactic that recalls the climax of Kurosawa's *Sanjuro* where there is a protracted moment of anticipation before the burst of action. At first the combat is indirect and Golden Swallow does not have to leave her seat to deflect the bandits' projectile attacks, but tension builds

as they consecutively attack until they reach the top of the staircase and their immediate boss is necessarily drawn into the fray.

The organisational structure of Golden Swallow's standoff at the inn also helps to outline her heroic characteristics. As a hero she has a special status and the combat must reflect this. She exhibits marvellous martial arts feats with props found in the inn setting, yet none of her tricks are the result of magical skill. Instead she is limited to constructively edited combat tricks of credible exaggeration. However, when Golden Swallow tosses the coins she literally spells out her status as a hero, moreover she reveals her identity as a *renowned* hero to the bandits – which forces them to ramp up their aggression. At this point in the narrative Golden Swallow must become more committed to the fight and will employ more of her skills as the villains become more threatening – a step up in the staircase formula and the narrative. At this point, swords are drawn and Smiling Tiger (Lee Yun Chung) orders his men to attack *en masse*. They are repelled and so he raises his sword only to have Golden Swallow slice the brim off his hat. When the swordplay does happen it is swift, which accords with the Shaw Brothers' call for a more realistic style. Swordplay does not immediately decide life or death at this early stage of the film's staircase formula, but it does bring the immediate fight's staircase formula sequence to a climactic end.

It is by virtue of Golden Swallow's skill that no blood is drawn (which, as we shall see in the final chapter, is in direct contrast to the wholesale slaughter committed by the villains in the first fight sequence). The villains relish killing but, as a hero, Golden Swallow is bound to avoid drawing her sword until pushed to the limit. In the

combat at the inn we can see how Golden Swallow's heroic restraint affects the escalating deployment of spectacles.

Likewise in Tsui Hark's *Seven Swords* the heroes do not use their swords until the fourth fight sequence. The fight sequences prior to that moment (2 and 3) feature Fu (Lau Kar-Leung) and they uphold the conceit that Fu is reluctant to draw his sword in atonement for past transgressions. In this way, by virtue of the righteous hero who attempts to avoid bloodshed, the ultimate generic spectacle of swordplay is withheld until the staircase formula is sufficiently advanced. The delay of swordplay, through the character trait of heroic restraint, is a deliberate method of giving narrative credibility to the way that the director has chosen to arrange his spectacular combat events so that they conform to the pursuit of novelty's demand for increasing spectacle *and* the staircase formula's requirement that the hero ascend toward more imposing opponents while not exhausting her range of skills before that moment.

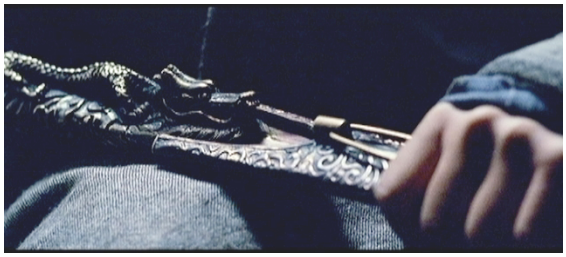
Seven Swordplay: Meaningful Combat

A type of action event can be repeated but there must be variation at the level of technique to provide novelty. One way that Tsui ensures novel swordplay is to equip his villains with bizarre weapons and his heroes with unique swords. In *Seven Swords* each of the swords has a peculiar design and so each sword not only encourages a peculiar fighting style but also represents a distinct spiritual journey or story-arc. Tsui deliberately pairs each of the seven heroic characters with swords that serve to accentuate their personalities. For instance, the Unlearn Sword, wielded by Fu, is so called because Fu is a retired, imperial executioner seeking redemption

from an ignoble past. Now he is learning how to help people – not kill them. As the first of the heroes to engage in combat (in the second fight sequence of the film) Fu does not engage in lethal combat. He does not draw his sword but uses a giant red-lantern to facilitate his escape from the villains. Even in the third fight sequence swords are not drawn and the spectacle of swordplay is postponed until later in the film.

Whereas Fu's Unlearn Sword retains typical (or traditional) sword-like qualities (although it is longer and whip-like) some of the other *Seven Swords* heroes carry more unorthodox blades. During battle the two new recruits from Martial Village appear to be compelled by their swords and the story-arcs of these characters concern their coming to terms with the complex natures of their individual swords. The 'Heaven's Fall' sword, given to the villager Wu, is a blade that can slide through its handle and out the other side – making it a highly unpredictable weapon. This sword is frustrating in the hands of a novice such as Wu, but very effective in the hands of a practiced combatant, such as Wu becomes. Another villager, Han Zhibang (Lu Yi), is quicker to adapt to his weapon – a massive, serrated broadsword called the 'Deity Sword'. This sword is wielded in a two handed fashion and is held at arms-length. Han twirls his body, like the action of a hammer-thrower, making it look as though Han is the pivot around which the sword swings. This is no mistake – there is a deliberate association between the swordsmen and their swords whereby their power is granted by their weapons – and Han's gutsy attitude is demonstrated by his fighting style. By tying the narratives of his characters into their fighting styles Tsui ensures that the spectacular moments of combat are thoroughly intertwined with narrative meaning.

The film's title is the first indication that there is a strong alignment between characters' personalities and their associated blade as it is derived from the novel *Seven Swordsmen from Mount Tian* by Lian Yu-sheng and so the truncated title, *Seven Swords*, anthropomorphises the swords and foregrounds their pivotal importance to the story. Also, the swordsmen are referred to as 'swords' throughout the movie. Reinforcing this notion are the performances during fight sequences when it appears that the swords are wielding the swordsmen rather than the other way around, in particular Han and his Deity Sword. Furthermore the ultimate hero, Chu, is not shown in close-up until 10 minutes after his Dragon Sword has been introduced in an earlier scene. The sword is introduced at 31 minutes into the film (the film is 153 minutes long).



At this point the power of the weapon is revealed as it is used to cut a hole in the cave-wall.

Ten minutes later, even when the viewer eventually glimpses Chu's face, he is literally preceded by the Dragon Sword.

Later, when Fire Wind (the chief villain of *Seven Swords*) uses Chu's Dragon Sword he does so with some difficulty. After clashing with Yang, Fire Wind tucks the Dragon Sword behind his back. A close up shot is used to show him having to grasp the Dragon Sword with both hands to stop him from shaking and to stop the shrill sound emitted by the sword.

Fire Wind is too corrupt to wield the Dragon Sword properly. If the sword is an extension of one's soul then Fire Wind's use of the sword is a gross misappropriation of what belongs to Chu. As well as being spectacular weapons the swords and their manipulation also impart crucial narrative content.

Chang Cheh's *One Armed Swordsman* (1967) also featured a similarly delayed introduction to an important character. In this film the delayed introduction is used to postpone the revelation of the ultimate villain, Long Armed Devil. Like Chu from *Seven Swords*, Long Armed Devil's principal weapon, a long whip, is established much earlier than his visage. In the earlier scenes, Long Armed Devil's face is kept hidden by his hat in wide shots, by his back to camera and judicious framing in closer views. During these moments the viewer does learn that this villain can

skilfully use his whip to make his victims writhe around on the ground. The first introduction to Long Armed Devil is at 77 minutes into the film but his face is eventually revealed at 93 minutes (the film is 111 minutes long). At this point Qi Rufeng ruefully greets him with the phrase, “Long time no see”, which also reveals a distinct directorial consciousness of this filmmaking tactic. This tactic serves to develop the viewer’s interest by generating a sense of anticipation around this mysterious figure and the threat that he and his weapons pose to the hero.

Filmmakers seek to rejuvenate familiar narrative tropes with inventive techniques in the display of combat. Weapons, and how they are used, are vital tools for keeping these violent encounters fresh. The next section also demonstrates the way in which narrative is expounded, rather than suspended, during fight sequences as a feature of the Hong Kong film style, an idea that will be further interrogated throughout the thesis, and in particular in Chapter 5 where combat sequences from *Come Drink With Me* and *Seven Swords* are subjected to a close detailed analysis. Like the examples of blood-work and constructively edited coin tosses, the demarcation between heroic and villainous traits and tactics further demonstrates the impact the pursuit of novelty has upon the Hong Kong film style.

Traps and Chopsticks: Delaying Swordplay and Conveying Character

Weapons are the integral prop of a *wuxia* narrative because they can be used for a number of functions, such as prompting plot twists, enhancing spectacle and they also define characters. The spiritual connection between weapon and wielder is a concept that has a deeper cultural resonance in both Chinese and Japanese cinema.

The troubled samurai, Musashi Miyamoto (Toshiro Mifune), places his *katana* before the sword-smith in Hiroshi Inagaki's *Duel at Ichijoji Temple* (1955) and asks: 'Will you kindly repolish my crude soul?' In *Sanjuro* (Akira Kurosawa, 1962) the eponymous samurai, Tsubaki Sanjuro (Toshiro Mifune), is referred to as a 'drawn sword', 'You cut well. But good swords are kept in their sheaths.' Tsui Hark has confirmed that masterful swordsmen do not use their swords unless absolutely necessary:

> the sword is not for striking, but for the manifestation of one's quality. One seldom unsheathes it. When necessary, one draws the sword only a third of the way, because when it is frequently exposed, oxidation ruins the metal. Too much clashing can also chip the sword. Moreover, to avoid spilling blood, even masters exercise restraint, striving to maintain harmony with opponents. (Ho and Ho 2002: 188)

This heroic character trait aids the staggered deployment of spectacle because it means that the hero will not draw her sword until forced too. Until that moment the hero will use other means of deflecting attacks and surmounting obstacles. As a result the director can engage in the pursuit of novelty and present other types of spectacle as a confrontation escalates toward direct, swords-drawn combat.

Anthropomorphism of the sword exists in the *wuxia* film too. Tsui has propounded the philosophy that '[t]he sword is not an object, but a trajectory of thought, a projection of the spirit' (Ho and Ho 2002: 193) and this concept is manifest in a number of his films where a thrown sword becomes a vehicle for the extension of *qi*-force from the hand of the caster. We might then consider that the sword represents the projection of a true, straight and honest spirit whereas more grotesque weapons represent more grotesque and corrupt spiritual identities. Indeed *wuxia* film villains rarely adhere to the rules of fair play and because they deviate from noble tactics

their weapons also deviate from the norm. The writers Lui Tai-lok and Yiu Wai-hung have shown that Chang Cheh's evil characters regularly use devious weaponry to defeat their sword-wielding counterparts and hence:

> the heroes' tragic ends come about not because of their shortcomings but rather they have fallen victims to the bad guys who succeed through their underhanded means. Even though the heroes possess extraordinary skills, they are inevitably caught off guard by the enemy's sudden attacks and ambushes. (2003: 169)

It is common for *wuxia* film-villains to be equipped with weapons that in some way undermine the use of the traditional sword and Lui and Yiu have also tabulated the '[c]ontrasting styles of combat between the good and the evil in Chang's action films' to find that that the villains typically employ tactics and weapons that subvert the code of honour by which the *xia* abide (2003: 168). For instance in Chang Cheh's *One Armed Swordsman* (1967) the villains wield the 'golden sword lock', which is a weapon devised by Long-Armed Devil (Yang Chi-ching) to render useless the 'golden swords' of the Golden Sword Sect.

Similarly the opening fight sequence of Lau Kar-leung's *The Eight-Diagram Pole Fighter* (1984) reveals that the villains use a weapon specially designed to trap the limbs and weapons of the heroes.

It is this weapon that the hero, Sixth Brother (Gordon Lau Kar-fai), undertakes training to overcome so that he is victorious by the end of the film. At this early stage, during the credits, the use of trick weaponry enables the audience to easily recognise characters as villains and to recognize that their weapons are a threat to the otherwise indomitable heroes.

While the villains' scheming gives them an advantage, it is the heroes' capacity to adapt to sudden combat conditions that levels the playing field. The hero is often a resourceful combatant who can make use of found objects to defend himself. The influence of Japanese constructive editing can be seen in Hu's preference for inn settings where there is a plethora of objects at hand that the hero can use to defend herself. In *Come Drink With Me* the bandits hurl mundane objects such as coins, a bench and a wine jug at Golden Swallow while she uses the innocuous chopstick to defend herself. Chopsticks are a favourite weapon when it comes to teahouse skirmishing. Golden Swallow uses them to thread and pin the villains' coins to the ceiling in *Come Drink With Me* while in *Dragon Gate Inn* the conceit of barely maintained civility is broached and the hero Xiao (Shih Chun) uses his chopsticks to fend off open attacks made with actual weapons such as arrows.

He also catches a knife in similar fashion and he uses his wine jar to trap and expel an arrow with deadly force. In this way Hu escalates and exhausts the immediate defensive and offensive possibilities provided by the mundane items on the tabletop.

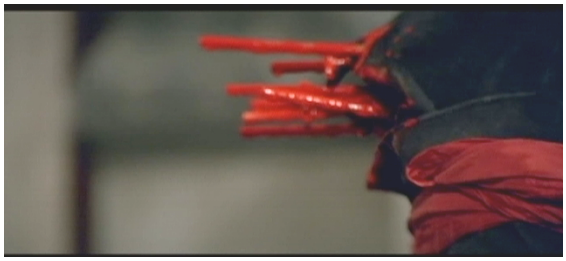
Like Golden Swallow, Xiao does not leave his seat and the implication is that he can maintain civility whereas the villains (government agents) cannot and so they effectively lose face.

In kung fu films like *Drunken Master* (Yuen Woo-ping, 1978) chopsticks are regularly used for defensive manoeuvres by heroes like Wong Fei-hung (Jackie Chan) and his Uncle So (Simon Yuen) to trap the limbs of assailants.

While the righteous hero maintains certain righteousness by avoiding bloodshed, the humble chopstick can also be used with lethal force when necessary – such as in Chang Cheh's *The Iron Flag* (1980) when Brother Lo (Kuo Cui aka Philip Kwok) parries an assassin's axe.

After the assassin recoils and swipes at Brother Lo, Lo snatches up a tea tray...

…which he uses to drive his points home with the aid of a right-to-left pan.



The whip-pan travels with the swinging tray to reveal the bloody, dripping sticks jutting from the assailant's back when the camera stops. This short combat sequence is made appreciable by a clear *mise en scène* and by keeping the significant action in the centre of frame. Even when the tray is snatched up through the top of the frame the bowls drop down to generate a dynamic conflict between the two directions of movement (tray up and bowls down) but subjects of interest stay in the centre of frame. By keeping the shot lingering upon the bowls as they fall, the editor provides a short ellipse which allows for the tray to be shown swinging in a lateral direction at the head of the incoming shot.

Although the heroes might be drawn into difficult situations they are typically endowed with the skill to use anything that comes to hand to fight their way out. Constructive editing and judicious camera movement will often help them in this

endeavor. While the villain may introduce an unforeseen obstacle, the hero's ingenuity and credible exaggeration supplied by constructive editing can nullify its effect with the utilisation of an incidental object. These conflicting tactical approaches aid the pursuit of novelty by staggering the spectacles of the fight sequence. They provide the director with a means of varying the ways that combat can be presented because each villainous trick can be countered by the hero's ingenuity and so the combat can be drawn out. Their unique weapons and incidental objects (used as weapons) enable numerous spectacular possibilities. By exhausting other possibilities for combat and withholding the direct clash of swords until its final stages, the excitement of the fight sequence is escalated toward that critical juncture.

The hero is reluctant to draw his blade while the villain will readily use bizarre and deceptive weapons to spill blood. A hero's primary weapon is the traditional sword, but he can also employ incidental objects to defend himself against attacks and, in so doing, will produce novelty before potentially more familiar swordplay occurs. Conversely the villain often uses new and unusual weapons, which produce novel combat through their bizarre operation. In terms of narrative development these contrasting character traits help to establish the moral alignment of a fighter without necessarily requiring much additional exposition. Although combatants may have familiar moral codes, their contrasting fighting tactics provide the filmmaker with a way to develop novel combat permutations. In particular, the way that the hero attends to combat reflects the affect of the *Sanjuro* climax whereby outright action is delayed. The interim waiting period is an opportunity to build up action events towards the clash of swords. The capacity of the hero to work with incidental objects

as weapons and their demonstration of righteousness by not killing helps to establish their special skills and delays the imminent death of their opponents, either within the fight sequence or within a later fight sequence where the combatants may meet again.

The kinds of weapons that can be employed are limited only by the filmmakers' imaginations. Finding and filming novel types of weapon is an indicator of directorial flair. Although possible types of weapons are multifold there is still a drive to exceed the work of other directors and, as we have seen in the previous combat application of chopsticks, it is a mark of directorial skill to re-use the same weapon but in a completely novel way. One way to do this is to exploit new technology. Novelty is inherent in the application of new technology to the film medium.

Tech-Novelty

Action filmmakers regularly use techniques that alter real-world processes as part of their arsenal of devices to astound the viewer. For example: as a combatant leaps, a rapid zoom-out increases frame size, or slow motion allows us to see an expertly delivered flying kick, or CGI effects show bones breaking. The action-film genre's safeguard is that the audience expects (and has paid for) novelty. However, the action filmmaker is prone to foreground the novelty of style and spectacle in the attempt to overawe the audience. There is a conflict of interest in action film production whereby filmmakers want the audience to recognise the novelty of their technical manipulation of a spectacular event (and their contribution to the canon of

technique), but at the same time they want to maintain mastery over technique so that the event is rendered believable.

Older film techniques can attract attention because they have become recognisable. Reisz and Millar claimed that Western editors have been engaged in a process of shedding unrealistic effects since the 1930s (such as iris-shots and 'quick, momentary flash-backs'); they also suggest that '[i]t would be rash to say that these devices will never be used again, but they have at present fallen into disfavour because they draw attention to technique and disturb the illusion of reality' (Reisz and Millar 1977: 45-46). Conversely, new film techniques can draw attention to themselves because of their sheer novelty. Technical harmony can be difficult to achieve when film-crafts are attempting to dynamically enhance action sequences without a unified approach and it is especially difficult to maintain when techniques do not necessarily accord with a previously established method of production or a familiar mode of presentation.

Technological advances may enable new and exciting methods of presenting action but the novelty of new techniques can also be distracting. The next section will discuss this process by investigating the maligned rapid zoom, which has been used in a variety of ways but with a modicum of success. Because it has been used indiscriminately, the rapid zoom has become synonymous with B-grade "chopsocky" films and parodies of kung fu films typically incorporate rapid zooms for humorous effect. This is a technology that enables unedited views of martial arts performances, which proves the integrity of an actor's athletic skill, yet this technology also draws attention to the film as a construction by manipulating the medium in a (potentially)

overt manner. However, in the hands of skilled Hong Kong filmmakers, the technique can be extremely effective and even be far subtler than I had initially expected.

Fly Me to the Zoom

Director Xu Zhenghong reports that the zoom lens arrived in Hong Kong around 1962-1963, but it did not become a significantly exploited tool until the early seventies (Lau 1996a: 203). During the period of the kung fu film's ascendancy, camera movement was one of the stylistic priorities of Shaw Brothers' films. At this time the rapid zoom provided a way of changing shot scale without compromising the integrity of the athletic performance. Thus it provided a kind of editing without cutting. Once the zoom lens caught on Xu also notes that it was 'used indiscriminately', saying that '[s]ome directors used it for convenience; others used it without really understanding its effects' (Lau 1996a: 203). In terms of convenience, the in-camera method of production is time consuming so there is a methodological economy in using a zoom to reframe the shot rather than setting up a new camera position. In effect, the zoom lens reframes the shot with an overt manipulation of the film medium.

The presentation of information can be dramatically enhanced by sudden lens movement, be it the isolation of information through the zoom-in or the expansion of information through the zoom-out. The *rapid* zoom also creates a dynamic sensation of propelling the viewer into or out of the action. The reframing of a shot can be extremely useful during combat sequences but when used indiscriminately

(especially during moments of exposition that do not warrant dynamic movement) zooms can become distracting.

There are four significant factors that affect the relative invisibility of the rapid zoom: context, timing, speed and camera movement. First, the rapid zoom draws attention to itself when used without apparent motivation – particularly during scenes that do not contain much action. Secondly, rapid zooms are less apparent when timed with a burst of action rather than a moment of stasis as the sudden reframing is motivated by on-screen movement. Thirdly, the speed of the zoom determines the duration of blurred frames that may be perceived by the viewer; slower zooms create more blurred frames. Finally, camera movement is less easy to define as it is primarily determined by the skill of the camera operators, the type of subject that needs to be framed and the distance traversed by the zoom, but if the subject or camera is moving (and there is a great distance between the camera and subject) then a seamless effect is harder to accomplish.

I counted the number of zooms during the Pao Tournament scene in *Challenge of the Masters* (Lau Kar-leung, 1976) and found that of the total 123 shots almost a third of those shots contain a zoom.[8] Of those 40 zooms there are 12 zooms-in and 28 zooms-out. I posit that one of the reasons that there are more zooms-out is because these are less complicated to successfully accomplish compared to the zoom-in. Zooming-in is a more troublesome prospect for camera operators, particularly from an extreme wide shot to a close-up. Whereas the zoom-out begins with the object with its smallest framing already located, the zoom-in must find the object it wants to frame.

[8] The Pao Tournament is one in which adepts of different martial arts schools compete for the possession of batons or 'pao'.

This can result in the rapid zoom-in not quite finding its target and veering off-course before re-framing.

Because of the changes in shot scale, either type of zoom represents a distinct stylistic decision. The zoom-out is a useful tactic as it provides an expansion of information from detail and the resulting wider shot then enables more sweeping martial arts choreography. The zoom-in exemplifies the act of engaging the viewer with the action. Zooming-in can isolate important details – the effect of a weapon, a hold being planted, or a close-up of a fighter's face to keep us informed of her attitude. For example, when Chen Erh-hu (Lau Kar Leung) and Huang Fei-hung (Gordon Liu Chia-hui) fight in *Challenge of the Masters*, a rapid zoom-in dynamically accentuates the force of Huang's over-head strike.

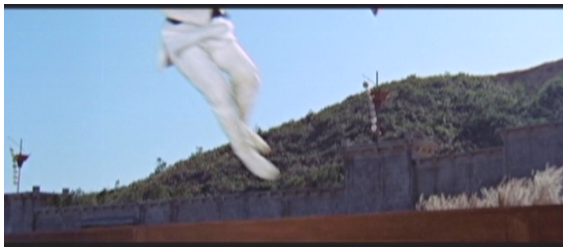
It also provides important narrative detail. The new framing provides a close-up of a dastardly metal appendage lodged in the bamboo stalk. It is this weapon that has made Chen's 'Sharp Kick' so deadly.

This is significant narrative information as it effectively shows that Chen no longer has any secret weapons that will pose a threat to Huang. Huang also becomes aware of Chen's sickening treachery. As a consequence of this action Chen is beaten into submission.

As well as the potential for the zoom-in to veer off target it also limits performance options. Once the smaller shot scale is established the potential for expansive action to remain contained within the shot is reduced, meaning that there are limited options for the fight to become expansive and to increase the shot scale once again. A common option is to cut shortly after the rapid zoom-in. Yet despite these limitations the rapid zoom-in is a powerful technique that hurls the viewer into the action and in this way it is more dynamic than the rapid zoom-out, which pulls the viewer away from the action. Because of this effect some directors opted to use the rapid zoom for its dynamism rather than for the confirmation of performance authenticity. Indeed some directors used it indiscriminately but others used it with considerable skill and novelty.

In Chang Cheh's *The New One-Armed Swordsman* (1971) the potential effect of the wayward zoom-in is craftily countered by the use of reverse-motion. Moreover the reverse-motion is specifically used to create an action that would be near impossible to capture with an actual rapid zoom-in. In the following example the display of technical skill and the dynamism provided by technique is favoured rather than any

notion of using the zoom to confirm the athletic performance. A zoom-out camera movement is combined with Lei Li's (David Chiang) backwards leap from a handrail so that the reversed result looks as though the camera and actor have operated in unfeasibly deft concert.



To show the hero leaping onto the narrow rail of the bridge as the faux zoom-in occurs.

The camera then isolates his face in a close-up framing.

Here the silent era tactic of the reverse-motion weightless leap is combined with 1970s era technology to create a superlative example of weightless leaping.

Due to over use, and the visibility of poorly timed camera and lens movement, the rapid zoom became synonymous with the B-grade kung fu fare. The screen consciousness that poor zooms provoke can verge on the comedic. However, when it is executed properly, a rapid zoom can be a highly effective dynamic tool. It can

avoid the generation of disturbing mental hiccups whilst delivering maximum impact - especially if it can create a blur of only 3 frames as in the *Two Champions of Shaolin* example. However, for the reasons I have indicated, it is a thoroughly difficult technique to master. Although it maintains the integrity of an authentic martial arts performance and it can economise the number of camera set-ups during production, it is not an assuredly invisible technique. Its problematic aspect is in its execution. It does not disrupt the diegetic reality of the film in the same way that slow motion does.

We might assume that audiences are prepared to accept techniques that most convincingly display whatever spectacles are inherent to the diegetic framework of a film. At present, audiences are (relatively) accepting of CGI. Even though it can often be a detectable effect it is presently allowable within this period's sense of realism. But Tsui Hark has pre-empted CGI's decline in novelty, so rather than using the technique in broad-stroke flourishes (such as in *Curse of the Golden Flower*, Zhang Yimou, 2006) he opts to integrate the technique into better concert with other film-crafts in *Seven Swords* (2005). Key to his style is a preference to use CGI in short shots rather than long takes so that it becomes incorporated into the edit rather than the edit being stretched to incorporate CGI. In this way, with attempts to keep its wirework and CGI invisible, the action in *Seven Swords* is rendered with greater deference to realism.

Pierson's notion that narrative stops for the presentation of flashy attractions is a very real concern for Hong Kong directors and they endeavour to avoid falling into the trap of dichotomising spectacle and narrative by considering style and inventing

new techniques. Along these lines Tsui Hark has warned against over-stylisation at the expense of the story, saying:

> I believe that when audiences are overfed with images, at a certain stage they begin to feel like they need something less. If it becomes too much, you feel like it is not important anymore. Suppose you have five hundred shots of fantastic stuff, you might not realise that you have started to degrade the importance of the shots. (Gravestock and Walsh 2006: 126)

This is a key point. Stylistic novelty is required to present familiar stories in ways that will stimulate the imagination of viewers rather than bore them but it is also important to use stylistic devices in a considered manner so as not to degrade the importance of the event. Tsui goes on to propose that even the demonstration of violence needs to be reconsidered to keep the martial arts film fresh. Tsui suggests that there is something novel about *not* presenting the moment of death, saying:

> Let's say you try to provide a limited visual … that would create more imagination. I always say that anything that happens off-screen doesn't mean it is not there – it is there … I would imagine that if you hear a gunshot and hear a guy on the floor, that's more interesting than seeing a gunshot and seeing a guy get hit … So, in terms of telling a story, you are trying to generate a new vision by telling the story in a different way. That's important. I think that with action movies, especially kung fu movies, we need to re-generate a new language for this kind of expression because otherwise it becomes tedious to see the same thing over and over again. (Gravestock and Walsh 2006: 126)

The idea that a violent spectacle is more interesting when it remains unseen indicates the extent to which Tsui feels the stylisation of violent spectacles may have been exhausted. With CGI providing unparalleled scope for spectacular invention perhaps Tsui wonders where the future of the martial arts genre lies? Violent action events can contain important narrative threads, yet Tsui feels that they also need stylistic re-invention so as to maintain viewer interest.

The pursuit of novelty is pervasive; within the context of generic convention and familiar character traits it encourages Hong Kong *wuxia* filmmakers to find innovative ways to stylise combat. A competitive spirit between Hong Kong filmmakers facilitates the pursuit of novelty and in their endeavours they have employed novel stylisations to reinvigorate common action events. Still, the novelty of action events diminishes with time and, if they are not reinvigorated, they get relegated to roles of lesser spectacular importance.

In the following chapter I conduct a more in-depth analysis of the ways in which filmmakers have used constructive editing to create spectacular feats. I analyse the persuasive effect of constructive editing to see how impossible events can be made visually plausible. The speed and content of shots are examined with the aim of finding out how quickly action can be presented yet still remain sensible. Of particular note is the idea that the viewer's eye movement must be controlled for the presentation of cogent dynamic action. The primary objective of the following chapter is to collate a number of editing techniques that are common to the *wuxia* film style but it also confirms that within the in-camera method of production each and every shot is a vital filmmaking decision.