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## Chinese Kung-fu Films and the Posthuman Daoism<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*This paper argues that Chinese- Kung-fu films are unique presentations of human movement as a system of bodily aesthetics. By adopting a Daoist aesthetics of yin-yang cosmology, martial artists perform the dictum by Zhuangzi's "The myriad things come out of ji and go into ji", with the character ji as some kind of the Deleuzian "desiring machine". There we see a human-technicality convergence as characterized by a posthuman merger within the process of complex visibility, particularly presented through the cinematic form. Kung-fu performance on screen, therefore, affords a kind of natural cyborg intersectionality within what can be called a posthuman Daoism, a kind of commingling of the ancient and posthuman technics.*

**Keywords:** *Body aesthetics; Calligraphy; Daoism; Kung-fu; Yin-yang assemblage*

### Introduction

Throughout its history, the genre kung-fu (功夫) films, particularly those in Hong Kong style, have undergone different stages of development. These stages are punctured by the relationship between the aesthetics of human action in fight (dubbed as martial arts), and their transformation in terms of how the human has merged with the machine. Summarily kung-fu films in the 50s and 60s relied on crude and primitive apparatuses, resorting even to home-made flying swords and exaggerated, make-believe action patterns undermining any sense of realism. Then came Bruce Lee in the 70s, and action displayed on screen began to wedge into the real to the delightful audience. Finally, we have the post-Bruce Lee era, an era which witnessed the introduction of more new technologies in which posthuman forms of human energy were emerging. Taken as a whole, kung-fu films started with the all-too-fantastic world away from humanist reality, to be succeeded by a sense of technological enchantment on the part of the audience accepting the preferred effect of 'real action,' almost forgetting that the action had been represented and made possible at least in parts by cinematic apparatuses. With the advent of postmodernism, in which simulacra of copies without the original reign supreme, we come across popular productions which can be considered as cashing-in on the transhuman ideal of "humanizing the machine" on the one hand, and on the other, "machinizing" the human body capacity through unlimited enhancement of the human.

<sup>1</sup> The phrase "Posthuman Daoism" may sound awkward to general readers. Please refer to my "The Yin-Yang Assemblage and Deleuze's Transcendental Empiricism: A Note on How Daoism Became Posthuman" for reference (Wong, 2018, 92-119). There I use Zhuangzi's famous fables of dreams to argue that Chinese Daoism has always been posthuman all along. At the end of this book chapter, I write: "And by the way, if you stick to what these dreams are about by naming them 'Zhuang Zhou dreams of being a butterfly,' you only, according to Cary Wolfe (2010, 125-126) abide by a humanist posthumanism at best. And if you like to be considered an advocate for posthumanist posthumanism, by all means you can turn the human upside down as in the character *hua* 化 and call it 'Butterfly dreaming of Zhuang Zhou'" (2010, 115).

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Digital composites and special effects arguably invade into the pure aesthetics of martial arts action; and they have created a phenomenon of a certain embodied structural coupling between the human and technics.

### **Human action by a natural cyborg**

This paper therefore attempts to argue that the Deleuzian notion of structural coupling between the human and the non-human in kung-fu films provides a strategic field for us to explore into the cultural position of critical posthumanism or “posthumanist posthumanism” (Wolfe, 2010, 124-126). This is carried out by our highlighting the manner the “complex visuality” is produced in this genre nowadays, as it serves as a “radical middleground” (Livingston, 2009) between human action and machine generated force. Such a middle ground points to the very in-betweenness of figure and ground which leads to our acknowledgment that we have always already been prosthetic creatures, co-evolved with various forms of technicity and materiality which are radically non-human, yet have rendered the human possible. With the aim of critiquing the traditional humanistic values and ontology, we hope to look into the specific ways kung-fu films help to illuminate the very process of contemporary technical and materialistic intensification and complexification. With Jean-François Lyotard’s warning that the human will soon reach a “material point” at which such a complexification reaches beyond our cognitive rhythm and ability to describe (Lyotard, 1991, 37), we find ourselves living in a world where, as adumbrated in second-order systems theory or neocybernetics, “super complexification of the environment” (Hansen, 2009, 114) prevails. My argument is that, if we accept Andy Clark’s suggestion that, after all, the human has been from the beginning “natural born cyborg” (Clark, 2004), then the Chinese martial arts novels and films, basing themselves largely on Chinese yin-yang aesthetics within Daoism, furnish rich materials to support the claim that, maybe, either we have never been human, pure biological human, or that we have always already been posthuman.

To assay and depict how kung-fu films actually embrace a “natural cyborg” worldview, and how they loop into the circuit of Clark’s heteropoiesis or Guattari’s machine heterogenesis (Guattari, 1993, 18), the machine which is “founded at the crossroads of the most complex and the most heterogeneous enunciative components” (22), one needs only to refer to Zhuangzi’s 《莊子》 dictum: “The myriad things come out of ji 機 and go into ji” (translation mine). The Chinese ji comes close to Deleuze’s and Guattari’s “desiring machine” in a cosmic dimension.<sup>3</sup> Just how cinema as technology proliferates machines as posthuman mergers within the process of complex visuality and material complexification, and how action films in Hong Kong style can facilitate rethinking of our relation with machines in general, will be dealt with later in this paper. We see on screen various permutations the traditional kung-fu masters cultivate, so as to establish a nuanced rapport with the sword and other weapons in hand as an integral part of their material existence. Here, Deleuze’s cosmic artisan is harnessed into how a weapon becomes a reciprocating agency in a feedback loop initiated by the martial artist’s projection of the potential force the weapon releases. Here technology is to be represented by the practice of metallurgy, the mystic and almost spiritual endeavor in which the human and metal coming-to-shape and even life is materially and physically blended together in the spirit of posthumanism in general. But before the sword, we should first learn

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<sup>3</sup> In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari talk about the Machine being the unthinkable forces of the cosmos, the “immense mechanosphere, the plane of cosmicization of forces to be harnessed” (1987, 343). Later in the same plateau, the mechanic for them becomes “cosmic artisan: a homemade atomic bomb” (1987, 345).



from the Daoist concept of tools being part of our body, and the hand and stick can become one, provided we nourish our body towards a state of “moving-in” (neng-yi 能移).<sup>4</sup> Such a practice bestows the body a capacity to phenomenologically coalesce itself with its tool in a nuanced concentration, the movement itself being technological through and through. As to metallurgy itself, Deleuze and Guattari speak of “metallic or metallurgical” as “the flow of matter” or the “events” of matter (1987, 410-411). Deleuze in *Cinema 1* then uses the idea of “non-organic life of things” to describe a type of montage which plunges into “the vital as potent pre-organic germinality, common to the animate and the inanimate, to a matter which raises itself to the point of life, and a life which spreads itself through all matter” (1986, 51; 55).

### Sword in hand and calligraphy on sand

We remember many a scene in kung-fu films where swords are considered vitally alive. When Lord Beili in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Lee, 2000) takes up the “Green Destiny” admiringly, he is sure that “swords need people to use to be alive, the Dao of swords is the dao of humanity.” In *Hero* (Zhang, 2002), the technology of sword-play is equated with other cultural systems such as calligraphy, and the pair of swords, inscribed in the yin-yang principle, are taken to be “lovers”; and even Emperor Qin in the film points out that “swords are humans and humans are swords.” In one memorable fighting scene in *Hero*, where we have Jet Li and Donnie Yen engaging in a poetically designed sequence with a sword against a long spear. It takes place amidst a resonating rhythm and reverberation produced by rain, water droplets, splashing, chess board soaked up with raindrops, and music from an ancient harp and singing by a blind musician. A fighting scene with such a mix of cultural systems must have been inspired by the yin-yang aesthetics, only to be highlighted eventually by Yen’s long but supple, vibrating spear (yin force) against Li’s hardened sword (yang force).<sup>5</sup> More relevant to our discussion here is the reed stick Broken Sword (Canjian 殘劍; What a name for a swordsman!) uses when he practices calligraphy on a pool of sand, apparently absorbed in a process of strengthening his own embodied capacity in martial arts at the same time. Here we can draw upon the Deleuzian concept of a tension (or balance) between “striated space” (for example systems of martial arts; systems of calligraphy) and “smooth space” which triggers forth singular and eventful creativity.<sup>6</sup> Using this pair of textualities, Lamarre differentiates the “imperial line” from the “abstract line,” the former belonging to the “center of gravity” and the latter to the “center of motion” in Chinese calligraphy (2002, 158). He then suggests that the “smooth space” enables the calligrapher to achieve “juxtapositions, overlays, inlays, complications, alternations that create new resonances” (Lamarre, 2002, 151).

<sup>4</sup> This is from the Chapter “Mastering Life 《達生》” in *Zhuangzi* where Confucius “passed through a forest where he saw a hunch back catching cicadas with a sticky pole as easily as though he were grabbing them with his hand.” This old man explained that he had trained his body “like a stiff tree trunk” his arm like an old dry limb.” See the translation of Burton Watson (1968, 199-200).

<sup>5</sup> In view of the fact that *yin-yang* is rendered as “difference” by Ames and Hall (2003), I am inevitably drawn to Astrida Neimanis’s “sexuate difference” in her book *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*. There Neimanis constructs her major argument through an “amphimixic perspective” (2017, 34-37) very much in tune with our fighting scene in question. Neimanis’s currents, rain, water in our body, even the “feminist lactating bodies” (2017, 36) do ring a bell to the sparring flow of energies, *yin and yang* for the supple spear and hard sword respectively, all under the *yin-yang* assemblage of sexualities. And when Neimanis identifies this “liquid ground” which flows in currents, it becomes a process of “ontologies of becoming, and a productive elaboration of life-in-the-plural.” (2017, 72) I feel obliged to draw upon it for not only the scene in question, but also as an apt description of the posthuman Daoism in Kung-fu films in general.

<sup>6</sup> For Deleuze and Guattari’s distinction between striated and smooth space, see *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987, 474-550).

We have just mentioned that Chinese calligraphy can lean on either the imperial (hence systematic and self-referencing) line or the smooth and nomadic (hence free-floating) line. We should note here that even within this art system in Chinese culture, there are schools or styles such as the more stately style called zhuan-shu 篆書 and the most free-floating, unbridled one known as cǎo-shu 草書 or the grassy style. With this in mind, we may concentrate on the tension created by this sequence in *Hero* the film, the tension the kung-fu master feels obliged to follow the strict rules of practicing zhuan-shu but not even with a brush on paper, but a stick-on sand. I would argue here that this sequence enacts an expressive situation where we can step into the realm of “emergence and closure” in neocybernetics.<sup>7</sup> Starting with Heinz von Foerster’s cybernetics of cybernetics and then the Luhmannian systems theory which bases itself on the idea that systems are operationally closed but environmentally open, Hansen stresses our need to adjust to the “multiple, diverse boundaries made necessary by the hypercomplexification of the environment” (Hansen, 2009, 114). He posits some system-environment hybrids that “realize their autonomy at a higher level of inclusiveness” through “a constitutive relation with alterity” (115). Therefore, with the imperial and humanist (striated) line of zhuan-shu in mind, we have here a martial artist practicing the royal style of calligraphy but trying to free himself and the practice by the posthumanist alterity provided by the reed stick and the sand pool. The operational closure of the stylistic system is put to test by the “undeniable agency of the environment as to some extent a non-reducible force of alterity” (115) of the reed stick on sand. Such a weapon, placed right onto a ground of “wild” complexity, moves the kung-fu sequence beyond the “motif of autopoietic closure” towards something called “heterogeneous correlations between humans and technics in our hypercomplex contemporary world” (116).

The whole “zhuan-shu on sand” episode in *Hero* can be placed alongside Gilbert Simondon’s philosophy of the transindividual where, according to Hansen, we have “a transductive account of continuity and discontinuity, a fluid shifting of scales between individual and collective agency ...” (2009, 133). Such a paradigm of discontinuous continuity and a mixture of agency as system-environment hybrid can be scaled up to a higher level of individuation in our kung-fu/calligraphy assemblage embraced by Daoism in general and yin-yang cosmology in particular.

From here we move into a major feature in the kung-fu discourse (in both novels and films), namely, the “rhythm of pause/burst/pause” as described by David Bordwell (2000, 222-224).<sup>8</sup> In both calligraphy and martial arts, the concept of dong-jing xiang-sheng 動靜相生 (movement and stillness giving rise to each other) suggests that stillness is the ultimate source of all energies. As we know, it is the martial art school tai-ji 太極 (or tai-chi) which emphasizes circular movements, beyond the learned and conscious moves of one-move-one-form (yizhao-yishi 一招一式), and which maximizes one’s physical power not by confronting force with force, but by drawing in the opponent’s force in a technique called jie-li da-li 借力打力 (borrowing force to strike force). This is made plausible by the Daoist concept of shi 勢 and

<sup>7</sup> For a general elaboration on this topic, see Bruce Clarke and Mark B. Hansen’s “Introduction” in *Emergence and Embodiment*, 2009, 6-15.

<sup>8</sup> In another article, Bordwell writes: “The Hong Kong performer has recourse to something like Eisenstein’s idea of recoil. For the actor’s key movements are often *separated* by noticeable points of stasis. We might describe this a pause-burst-pause pattern... A pause often enframes each instant of action, giving it a discrete, vivid identity. The result is a kind of physics of combats and pursuit: out of quiescence rises a short, sharp action, which ceases as energy is switched off and stored for the next action” (2001, 80-81).



shun shi 順勢 (in-accord-with or to abide by the moving structure of force). Here we are reminded of Jane Bennett who makes use of the notion shi 勢 to explain what an assemblage is. By granting the affective bodies a kind of “vital materiality” which generates agency power, Bennett turns to shi—through the sinologist François Jullien’s *The Propensity of Things: Toward a History of Efficacy in China*—as “the very disposition of things” whose “assemblage is vibratory”. What goes on in the process of emergence of an assemblage can be attributed to this shi which is “the style, energy, propensity, trajectory, of élan inherent to a specific arrangement of things... shi names the dynamic force emanating from a spatio-temporal configuration rather than any particular element within it” (Bennett, 2010, 35) Calligraphy and kung-fu are closely related as two closed systems but open to each other in a co-evolving, nonlinear and mutually transformative fashion.

When Laozi 老子 in Daodejing 《道德經》 (or Taoteching) talks about the demeanour of two archaic animals *you* 猶 and *yu* 豫—later combined to become a compound noun *yoyu* meaning hesitation—he grants a guidance to martial arts in general a principle for all systems (schools, programs, sets of moves) to follow. We are reminded of many actions display in kung-fu films, including those by Bruce Lee, where we see numerous sequences of zoom-in shots with feet shifting and slow movements to the point of absolute stillness, at times edging with the feet inch by inch, right at the point of an emergent attack or defence. It is as if the fighters’ bodies were, in Deleuze’s terms, in an “in folding” of a pressing multitude of incipencies, right at a critical moment between a germinal state and the act of selecting a form of action. Humans, animals, and other inorganic life forms have, according to Deleuze, different “durations” and the differential intensities are best detected in their structures of “interval” which are open to their environment.

From here we are led to appreciate the metaphorical intention of the title *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* which prioritizes the Daoist *shi*, reminding us that this pause-burst-pause pattern in kung-fu films has its origin from the concept of *xushi daifa* 蓄勢待發, gathering your *shi* with action in ferment or folding-in on itself. Through the crouching and hiding “posture,” you reach the threshold of releasing a force of intensity at a moment of maximum disequilibrium. Martial artists therefore learn from animals’ instinctive movement-nonmovement of caution and intensity. One rather impressive sequence, despite its brevity, is when the young Jet Li learns from a live frog how to jump high in *Shaolin Temple* (1982). Duels in kung-fu movies are from time to time punctuated by Deleuze’s interval, an interference of cutting-in, a negotiation between psyching up the embodied capacity and the Deleuzian “affect.” As affects are blocks of sensation, the very contents of the system-environment hybrids, we have a tension between form and event (tendencies of the moving structure *shi*), duellists in a fight need this interval either for another singular move or remaining in a multitude of choices within an event of virtuality of capacities—in Deleuze’s bio-philosophy, a kind of “creative explosion” (Deleuze, 1988, 100). Action in duration is action of quality change. It is as if the crouching of tiger and hiding of dragon were waiting for a climactic moment of explosion. The Chinese expression “to use stillness to overcome motion” (*yijing zhidong* 以靜制動) is precisely a recognition of this durational fluidity which renders real change possible. Insofar as this posthumanist stretching over towards a sense of “truth” about animal, I would argue that what the martial artists achieve is a robust sense of the “animal as such” as delineated by David Wood with the example of his “playing cat” (2020, 140-141).

## Form-event (yin-yang) assemblage and becoming-tai-ji

The mutual reinforcement between the operational closure of a system (form) and the “experience of presence” (event), as Landgraf suggests, opens to the contingent environment in which interaction of some kind—in our case the eventful sparring of martial artists—is made possible (2009, 196-198). Performances move “from questions of system differentiation to the question of system irritation” and a “performed improvisation... highlights the mutual ‘irritability’ of psychic and social systems” (Landgraf, 2009, 181). As events reside on the level of how we perceive movement in all its rich complexity, “unplanned movements” burst out and “flow into the creative process” (Landgraf, 2009, 188) in an unexpected, even surprising way. This attempt at breaking out from the conscious effort of adhering steadfastly to one-move-one-form as mentioned before, has been up-held by Daoism in principle. It is then more manifestly seen in, say, *tai-ji quan* 太極拳 (fist-play) or *tai-ji jian* 太極劍 (sword-play) where passage always precedes position. There, isolated moves in training have to be obliterated in actual combats. Instead, one would go into a seamless circling of moves in non-moves, *tai-ji* being bodily action in a multiplicity of moves with perfect fluidity. All a set of fist-play or sword-play wants to retain during the sparring would be the folding and unfolding of the temporal flow, in which circle overlaps with circle, one being nudged away of another, which is in turn engulfed by yet another. The famous *kung-fu* novelist Jin Yong 金庸 has in one memorable episode described in detail this Daoist embodied aesthetics, when a novice fighter learns his move and non-moves of *tai-ji jian* by learning to unlearn individual moves altogether.<sup>9</sup> Such a position finds echo with Deleuze’s notion of an assemblage as “a concept dealing with the play of contingency and structure, organization and change,” emphasizing all the while the side of “the process of arranging, organizing fitting together” instead of “arrangement or organization” itself (Wise, 2005, 77).

When it comes to improvisation of *ji-xing* in *kung-fu* films, no martial artist can perform better than Jackie Chan. In relation to the dynamics of how order or system is achieved from the chaotic environment, and how environment opens up the system to a second-order complexification, we can rekindle our fond memory of a particular sequence in Chan’s early endeavor, namely *Drunken Master* 醉拳 (1978). This set, as it turns out, is endowed with two special characteristics; first, the eight moves are associated respectively with the eight legendary figures in popular Daoism, and second, they all liked wine. As the title of the set suggests, its practitioner will magically gain extraordinary strength and power by getting drunk; and attending to this motif, Jackie Chan does a most pleasing and convincing job, where

<sup>9</sup> Jin Yong in *Heaven Sword and Dragon Sabre* (*Yitian Tulongji*) has a famous scene where the Grand Master Daoist Chang first demonstrates in front of everybody, including enemies, a round of his recently created *tai-ji jian* for Chang Wuji’s immediate use. Having been attentive and learned by heart the pattern in this *tai-ji jian*, and having digested the moves, the young Chang reports that he has only one move left in his mind. The master, pleased by the young man’s quick achievement, then begins another set, this one totally different from the first. The young Chang then walks around the hall, thinking through the whole pattern of moves, and finally announces that not one single move is left in his mind—henceforth he will be perfectly ready for his eventual triumph over the enemy. I would juxtapose this *tai-ji* concept with what Deleuze says in *Difference and Repetition* about repetition as “by nature transgression or exception, always revealing a singularity opposed to the particulars subsumed under laws” (1994, 5). What the master does the second time is no mere mechanical repetition but a Deleuzian process of “signaling”. Such a signaling is a dynamic rhythm process, a repetition of “an internal difference which it incorporates in each of its moments” (1994, 20). As for the young Chang, what he will do during actual fights is a difference or a change in itself, armed as he now is with a plurality of positions and modulatory moves that go beyond any representation. Every move he makes in future will be but one among many “free variations” (Massumi, 2002, 77), and will focus on the “plus” within a structure of “one-plus-one-plus-one”, and this “plus” itself constitutes the outside of any relational process of an event.



irregular swinging of the body, fists seemingly circling with no focus, legs slipping and stumbling without falling off, are expertly enacted on screen. One should note here that the very notion of practicing *kung-fu* when drunk already hints at an attempt to break the restricted rules of the pre-given set; and self-programming is already lurking from below consciousness, with the unsteady body rocking in a “smooth” way like, as it were, a swinging reed stick in sand. As this “irritation” of system develops, we come to the last move which models itself on a female enchanted being, the move Chan has refused to go into earlier since it looked too feminized to him (psychic and social systems at odds with event). The sequence then climaxes when Chan is at the point of losing the sparring, supposedly having missed this move results in a fatal impairment of the system (program, set). Here comes the improvisation: Chan is instructed to learn on the spot the secret of unlearn by creating unplanned moves. He is to incorporate the other moves altogether with radical fluidity, throwing himself into a creative flow of action by interlacing the action with gulping wine as intervals way beyond the original set. Indeed, what is being dramatized here is how the form-event assemblage works by “a simultaneous conception and presentation of art” (Landgraf, 2009, 187) which can also be described as an experience of experience creating new experiences.

We now propose to take *tai-ji* as an entry point to “think” over issues of speed, from speed of kinetic movement to that of the technology apparatus of cinema. On the most fundamental level, the cinema, as Scott Bukatman puts it, “is a medium dedicated to the recording of action, of movement, whether the movement of the objects of the world, the movement of the camera, or even the movement of the film through camera and projector” (Bukatman, 2011, 166). Cinema being an art form expressing itself through moving images, which, according to Deleuze, move thinking along, it may not be too far-fetched for us to think into the moving of movement in cinema, through the unique duration structure of *tai-ji*, for an explication of speed in both systems. *Tai-ji quan*, for example, has puzzled many onlookers in that in practice sessions, the posture of its movement is much slower than our normal physical motion. Such deliberate slowness, the master explains, is to trigger forth—you are supposed to be in a state of utmost relaxing condition as a start—an inner force by enacting a flow of energy which generates the bodily *qi* 氣 from within. *Tai-ji* cosmology is such that it even animates forces on earth, “worlding with the lines and a rock, sand, and plants, becoming imperceptible” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, 280). All in all, *tai-ji* delivers its moves and non-moves in between chaos/cosmos/environment which designate time itself, time that is directly embodied in a concrescence of vibration and rhythm, iteration, and reiteration (circle after circle) without obstruction of the heart. As to the visibility of images, Bergson already tells us that “an image may *be* without *being perceived*—it may be present without being represented” (1988, 22; 35). For Deleuze, “Perception can grasp movement only as the displacement of a moving body or the development of a form. Movements, becomings in other words, pure relations of speed and slowness, pure affects are below and above the threshold of perception.” Paradoxically, “movement also ‘must’ be perceived, it cannot but be perceived, the imperceptible is also the *percipiendum*,” everything depends on the thresholds of perception (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, 280-281). In an interview Deleuze explains his “The brain is the screen” by suggesting that “thought is molecular. Molecular speeds make up the slow beings that we are” (Deleuze in Flaxman, 2000, 366). Thought is to be provoked, say, by the time-image proper through which the crystalline structure of time directly presents itself on screen in a “becoming as potentialization, as series of powers” (1989, 275). This is not duration and movement added

to life by means of representation, rather it is the “blocs of becoming, the image-movement” (1987, 58) that create the becoming of life as pulsation and vibration.

With the amazing visuals captured by digital composites, speed is now shown by multiple exposures, differentiating rhythms and varying speeds of many kinds. As early as in King Hu’s productions, notably in *Come Drink with Me* (1966) and *Dragon Inn* (1967), we already are presented with techniques such as “de-framing” of action so that the speedy action takes the form of “non-speed,” that is, speed beyond detection by the human eye. As Bergson has taught us, the distance between these two terms, presence and representations, seems just to measure the interval between matter itself and our conscious perception of matter” (Bergson, 1988, 35). What we find in these films are actually Deleuze’s time-images which grant us a direct view of time in “false movements” that shatter our “sensory-motor schema” (1987, ix). There we are supposed to witness the swiftness of, say, a sword cutting up a candle without actually seeing it, but through a split second’s flashing and clashing of lights, then the next thing we see is the candle resting stably on the swordwoman’s blade, still lit up as before. We remember in *The One* (2001) when Jet Li puts up an awesome feat of speedy action by out-running a police car, as the act clearly demonstrates the cinematic effect of constructing “impossible presents”<sup>10</sup> through the overlapping of two worlds, separating slow motion and the sped-up one, and then putting them back together, with a perfect matching of sound effects. These phenomenal actions are now made plausible by high-tech or digital special effects, and by shots which are produced with super 8 (faster than the usual 24 frames per second), resulting in fantastic bodily kinetics. We have now come full circle in the embodied experience of technology, in that the fluidity of the camera enhances a fluidity of body movement in perfectly uninterrupted continuity. Digitalization and special effects obviously add other dimensions of bodily movement, dimensions which are congenial, in a mutually reinforcing and transforming way, to *kung-fu* and to cinema, as both should be accepted as arts of technology per se. The adding onto the so-called “authentic” human capacity for action and speed, say, by computer, could well be a response precisely to an embodied complexity among human, machine and cinema, all housed in a posthumanist embodying technology of the twenty-first century.

## How cinema thinks on body-movement aesthetics

So, what is this something that steps beyond humanism we find in *kung-fu* films? For an answer, we have to flesh out what Deleuze means with his succinct remark that “cinema produces reality” (Deleuze, 1995, 58). This means, according to Richard Rushton (2011, 13), that “cinema produces modes of perceiving and experiencing that offer the possibility of another kind of world”. For Deleuze, there is such a thing as cinematic consciousness providing realities beyond human reality, since “the cinema, now human, now inhuman, or super-human” (1986, 20). Hence, the issue of fabulation is particularly relevant to *kung-fu* films where they are faced with the problem of credibility, since many of the actions displayed on screen are the result of either exaggeration—particularly matched, punch-by-punch, with the

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<sup>10</sup> This term is taken from Deleuze’s discussion in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* of Leibniz’s *Theodicy* (1989, 414-416): “Leibniz says that [a] naval battle may or may not take place [tomorrow], but that this is not in the same world: it takes place in one world and does not take place in a different world, and these two worlds are possible, but are not ‘compossible’ with each other” (1989, 130).





usually over-done kind of sound effects,<sup>11</sup> or the impossible feats of people flying in the air and running on walls. The main issue here is that from a humanistic point of view, these productions can well be deemed crude and merely for cheap entertainment. This notwithstanding, this paper argues that *kung-fu* films do trigger our thought towards how cinema itself thinks, through cinematic consciousness, in terms of both the virtual and the actual, as we now experience an ever-increasing degree of posthuman material and technical complexification. They provide us with different operations in differential speeds and digitality, specializing in movements of all kinds, subject again to observation of observation by the second-order systems theory or neocybernetics. Therefore, should we decide not to be repelled by our claim that weapons have a say in shaping themselves, that the human-nonhuman (machine, animal, cyborg) interface has always already been there as part of our reality, that humans and human bodily movements are co-evolving together not only with machine in general but also with cinematic fabulation in a process of symbiosis as “real-but-not-real,” we should be able to appreciate more of *kung-fu* films than as mere entertainment. We can treat them not only as experimentation with body-movement aesthetics, with digital visuals innovation, but also as an exemplary case study on many of the issues in the dynamics of humanism - posthumanism controversies.

*Kung Fu Jungle* (2014) is the recent production with the city of Hong Kong itself as background. It combines a detective motif with martial arts displays in a cosmopolitan setting which automatically brings the traditional technology of martial arts to exist alongside the modern world of advanced technologies, and the director makes a point to dramatize this situation by many zoom-in shots exclusively for mechanic gadgets such as computers, cell phones, DNA samples, photographs in the police records, etc. All these culminate into the final showdown of the two fighters who perform their awesome sparring along a motorway amidst running trucks, speeding containers and other vehicles. With *Kung Fu Jungle*, western technology is taken for granted as daily reality; and it is within such an environment that human bodily action is put side by side with a world spliced up by machine of all kinds. We as viewers cannot help from noticing the repeated image of mechanical splicing of some metallic devices, the whole screen being filled with glittering and sparkling fire. This dazzling mechanical job of a welding burner is then juxtaposed by some other home-appliances, and we inevitably treat ourselves with a giggle when we are given a scene where someone watching TV at home, with Jackie Chan performing his drunken fist on screen. We will remember that as the headmaster of a school of *kung-fu* style by the name *He Yi Tang* 合一堂 (Unity Hall), Yen holds on to the idea—and in fact, he has it always on his lips—that “weapons are extensions of the human hands and feet; and this is called the human-apparatus unity.” This reverberates to what we have mentioned concerning the embodied capacity of “moving-in,” a two-way traffic between a *kung-fu* master and his/her apparatus in the process of structural coupling. Here, in *Kung Fu Jungle*, we are treated with a more elaborate enunciation of how “heteropoiesis” takes place. The kind of decoupling of the biological autopoiesis into the more complex “coupling of the human and the technical,” through a process of “externalization of the living in tools, language, archives, and institution” (Hansen, 2009, 136). In hope of convincing the detective that his martial arts background can help holt the serial killings, Yen starts to reiterate his *kung-*

<sup>11</sup> In relation to cinematic fabulation, John Mullarkey further explains synchresis as a sound effect which “can be used to generate a reality effect in virtue of a *mismatch* between sound and image” (2009, 198). He then goes on with his observation of “synchresis” which is directly relevant to our case here: “What is most notable is how film-makers exploit synchresis to *increase* the reality of certain implausible scenes. Various special visual effects, for instance, are made to seem ‘more real’ by adding an artificial sound, explosions being the most obvious case ... The same can be said for the sound of fighters’ punches...” (198-199).

*fu* axioms: “One starts with the inner energy (*nei-gong* 內功) and expresses it later as outer energy (*wai-gong* 外功) in order to achieve unity of the two, the inner *yin* merges with the outer *yang*, inner and outer perceived as positioning embedded in one single apparatus” (*nei-wai guan-wei yi qi* 內外觀位一器). To go into all these, we can focus on the grand finale to illustrate how the whole sequence is designed, choreographically speaking, so as to be in consonance with Yen’s *kung-fu* axioms, having based themselves on the Daoist *yin-yang* heteropoiesis. Here we are apt to ask: What is so special about a piece of bamboo pole in *kung-fu* films? How can it inspire us towards a persuasive argument that not only *kung-fu* on screen can be considered posthumanist in its posture, but also – turning to a reverse way of thinking – that the genre may well be an ideal test-case to give support to a new theory of films in general that, as Mullarkey suggests, “cinema thinks, but in a non-philosophical way” (2009, 215).

We have mentioned that calligraphy and martial arts are separate systems which are operationally closed, but it is the very closure that renders possible their opening to the contextual environment, an environment which embraces numerous factors and on many scales. The issue here is how on earth can a calligrapher generate and materialize a flow of energy in his/her work, or to achieve certain level of *tie-hua yin-gou* (iron lines and silver hooks) by or through this soft tip of the brush? In other words, how does a soft, supple, and resilient substance give rise to a show of hardened strength and force? Once again, we can resort to the Daoist *yin-yang* for an answer. We know that *yang* possesses characteristics such as masculinity, firmness, action, and the spreading of heavenly (hence bodily) *qi* 氣, whereas *yin* is attributed with qualities of storing, keeping, and refracting, feminine nourishing and caring, opening up a smooth space as it were, responding to the *yang qi* with an enormous absorbing power. If *yang* is likened with solidity and stability like a mountain, rock, or any other hardened matters, then *yin* would be the fostering force behind it, always turning its passivity into a power supreme as obliging as the flow of water but life-giving in its different phases as liquid, air and waviness, always making way for a complex generation and distribution of energies of all sorts. Now we can turn back and pursue further what Donnie Yen’s axiom “inner and outer perceived as positioning embedded in one single apparatus” tries to say. It turns out that both calligraphy and martial arts rely on an alteration of *yin* and *yang* elements, *yang* being the source of quick, hardened external force, much like the striking of expressive, perceivable and procreative forces lashed outward, whereas *yin* would have something to do with the slowdown motion, say, of *tai-ji* from within, invisible, nourishing and reinforcing the vital *qi* (and blood) circulation so that a maximum embodied capacity reverberates through the body as an unimpeded flow of energy.

In terms of this *yin-yang* heteropoiesis, I would therefore suggest here, that what a bamboo pole means to a martial artist is similar to what the brush functions for a calligrapher—similarity here spirals on different physical and cultural scales. Both bamboo poles and brushes provide the artists with an apparatus for them to move in, meanwhile maximizing their unique characteristics of being soft and pliable which help mustering up the inner power for an eventual and eventful lashing out of impacts by sweepy and speedy strikes of force. With these “tools” in hand, the human gets to amalgamate into a non-linear and emergent process of fluid and rotational connectivities, a process which finds its authority from *Laozi’s* dictum: “Everything carries *yin* on its shoulders and *yang* into its arms and blend these vital energies (*qi*) together to make them harmonious (*he* 和)” (Ames & Hall, 2003, 142-143). Moreover, a brush, as amazing as it can be, could be even more lethal than a bamboo pole in *kung-fu*



narratives. It is known to *kung-fu* fans that an apparatus called *chén-fu* 塵拂 (whisk or duster, fly-brush) used by Buddhist monks, nuns and Daoists, can be a most vicious weapon if need be. Fans get to witness many a scene (on screen and in fiction) where the soft hairs transform themselves one by one into pointed needles as hard as steel. This amazing feat is of course rendered possible by the *kung-fu* masters who work wonders with delivering both *yin* and *yang* forces at will; and the soft hairs in the *yin* state can become a *yang* power, and yet back to soften itself, all depending on the specific occasions or intervals during the fluidity of fight in action. The point here is that the very apparatus in the hand of a *kung-fu* master can be “unified into one single entity” with its *yin-yang* assemblage which embraces both form and change by curving into each other. This is carried out, however, mainly by the *yin* principle of pliability and resilience, just as drops of water can be life-giving at one moment, but piercingly harmful and even poisonous to the flesh like arrows at another moment.

Traditionally, bamboo shafts have been a favorite icon/symbol among poets, painters, and literati alike. This may be due to bamboo shafts having a form described as *zhong-kong you-jie* 中空有節 (hollow inside with rhythmic intersections), *jie* harboring virtuous moral principles as well. This long and “extended third arm of the body” has played a big role in many ingenious designs and choreographies of human movement throughout the history of martial arts aesthetics. The fight as a dance reminds us of the Daoist’s becoming what Ira Livingston calls “radical middleground” (citation). With Zhuangzi’s “transformation of things” *wu-hua* 物化, the fighters arrive at Livingston’s “being-in-the-middle,” the middle at the edge-of-chaos between order and disorder “which throws figure and ground into question” (2009, 254) The fighters’ performance, in a kind of poetic rhythm, now becomes a paean to an anti-foundationalism based on a concept of germinal life. It is also something which echoes Deleuze and Guattari’s description of vibratory milieu: “What chaos and rhythm have in common is the in-between—between two milieus, rhythm-chaos or the chaosmos: ‘Between night and day, between that which is constructed and that which grows naturally, between mutations from the inorganic to the organic, from plant to animal, from animal to humankind...’” (1987, 313). The bamboo shafts in hand now mix with bamboo scaffolding as environment. To our amazement, we are taken farther away from the natural habitat in *Kung Fu Jungle*, and instead a breathtaking bamboo pole showdown on, along, across and between motor highways, with many vehicles dashing around, honking and flashing their head lights all the while. Such a shift of ground with ground-as-figure is to make a point to proffer the modern-day thematic of human-technics polemics. Here the bamboo poles retain their *kung-fu* attributes of embracing the *yin-yang* assemblage, their salient feature being an apparatus which cleaves to the perceived position of uniting inner and outer forces. The inner force (*yin*) flips and flickers, resounding with tips of hairs as with a brush, but then only to be transformed into many darts dashing forward as outer force (*yang*) at other moments, the shafts having been turned back to become a long hard rod, ready to chop into pieces anything in its way.

### Commingling of the ancient and posthuman technics

If we watch this fight close enough, we should be able to applaud its more than impressive quality of *kung-fu* performance. Adhering to the traditional varieties of spearing, banging, and thrusting, also the legendary moves aiming at the opponent’s vital acupuncture points on the body, poles are to interact with each other, at times in unison, but other times one pole shows off its unimaginable agility by reaching the target with such a speed that outplays the

opponent's initial attack. The two poles then repeatedly make a cross-formation during attack/defense moves, all the while matched with the sound made by not only banging and crossing, but also the whipping of the wind stirred up by the swift and magnificent action. As mentioned, bamboo poles can display the *yin-yang* alternation, during which we start seeing images of "flowery" structures created through the phenomenal circling of the poles, with the visual effects of numerous poles (and their chiaroscuros) glittering, softly and forcefully at the same time. All these are already a feast for the eye of every viewer, including connoisseurs of *kung-fu* fans. The very audacity of a motorway scene with dashing vehicles all around, is to pave for a commingling of the ancient technology of Chinese *kung-fu* with the new technology of transportation, to pave for a space mixing up the striated (the highway, motor honing/flashing) with the smooth (pole-fights with beautiful human forms) in the Deleuzian sense. The environment, the ground, quickly takes up the role as a figure, a third player with its own deadly weapon. It turns around and starts to enact a posthumanist "naturalism," so to speak, an indifference as a tremendous killing power-house without discrimination, without caring who you are. Then another dramatic turn of the events ensues. For a while, the fighters seem to be in control over their "moving" environment, jumping up to a truck top, using the pole as lever, swinging in pursuit of each other to the other side of the road. Soon enough the machines begin to assume a much more active and aggressive role than before, and humans now have to turn to fight the machines (vehicles) as their common enemy. In face of such a challenge by the machine, we have drifted along and at length with the posthumanist notion, say, that we are all naturally born cyborgs; and it is right here that we can be firmly on the ground of a posthuman Daoism.

*Kung-fu* films are of course not film noir; they nevertheless provide a sense of "foggy" light, which according to Galloway, "glows with a certain ambience" (2014, 139). Galloway draws upon the science of optics with two kinds of light, namely the dioptric and the catoptric. Whereas the latter is light *reflected* from opaque objects and therefore a carrier of meaning as in a mirror, the former is light *refracted* as with lenses, hence refraction rays stay inside the material world, themselves being transparent like droplets of water in the sky (2014, 139-143). To me, *kung-fu* films in general are filled with this dioptric light, this luminosity of glowing ambience in the foggy but refracted rays, rays in an absolute immanence of all filmic thinkings through the screen, refracting among different system-environment hybrids including fantastic human action, merger of human and technics, the digital apparatus, spectatorship, etc. All these rays do not claim credulity or realism, but they resist reflective norms of meaning (such as the ethical norms, the imperial line of thinking, the authority), meaning of the human-centered world. Some films may dramatize heroism as reflected through the catoptric optics, but a few can recede a bit to be non-heroic, ending with an ordinary man-in-vision as we witness in *Kung Fu Jungle* which poses a shock to the system of the genre itself. *Kung-fu* films hence-forth serve as the montage thinking through their display of what a human body can do in a posthumanist worldview. If films are nothing less than creating thoughts out of moving images in a refractive fashion, the Chinese *kung-fu* films are models in their circling patterns (both patterns in martial arts and those in cinema productions) of movements.

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