

Luke White, “Lau Kar-leung with Walter Benjamin: Storytelling, Authenticity, Film Performance and Martial Arts Pedagogy,” as accepted for *Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies* (JOMEC), Special issue on “Martial Arts Studies,” No. 5 (June1024)

The final published article is available at:

http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/jomec/jomecjournal/5-june2014/White_Authenticity.pdf

The contents page of the journal is available here:

<http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/jomec/research/journalsandpublications/jomecjournal/5-june2014/index.html>

Author’s contact: l.white@mdx.ac.uk lukewhite@mac.com

When citing, please use the article as actually published in JOMEC.

File prepared for Middlesex University Research Repository, 2014.

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Lau Kar-leung with Walter Benjamin: Storytelling, Authenticity, Film Performance and Martial Arts

Pedagogy

Luke White, Middlesex University.

In *Martial Arts as Embodied Knowledge*, DS Farrer and John Whalen-Bridge (2011: 1) propose an emerging field called 'martial arts studies', which (amongst other things) attempts to treat the martial arts in all their complexity as cultural phenomena existing within the transnational flows of signification of our globalised media age. The Chinese martial arts are the epitome of such phenomena, owing their international visibility, to an extraordinary degree, to the global craze in the 1970s for the Hong Kong movies that placed the performance of these fighting arts at their core. So entangled are these arts and their cinematic representation that the same term, 'kung fu' (a term that itself stands as testimony to processes of cultural mistranslation) serves to nominate film genre and fighting style alike.

It's in the spirit of martial arts studies, then, that I'd like to approach 'kung fu' not simply either as martial art, nor as film genre, but in terms of the way the two are yoked together. What is striking about this martial arts/film complex is the technological disjunction between cinema's industrial processes and the ancient, corporeal arts celebrated in the figure of 'kung fu' – arts ostensibly outmoded by the very technological complex of mass production characterising cinema and modern warfare.

The locus of the co-existence of modern and ancient technology is the charismatic performing body of the kung fu star, at once the product of martial training *and* the cinematic apparatus. The pivotal status of the star's body is underlined by its centrality in the particular aesthetic effects and pleasures of kung fu cinema, which in Leon Hunt's (2003: 2) view constitutes an example of the 'body genres' theorised by Linda Williams (1991). These are genres whose ecstatic effects rely on the address of their corporeal subject matter to the viewer's own body, evincing somatic rather than primarily cerebral responses. In a much-cited passage, David Bordwell (2001: 73, 93) recounts such physical reactions in kung fu spectatorship: 'As you walk out of the best Hong Kong action movies you are charged up, you feel like you can do anything', he writes, concluding that such films can 'infect even film professors, heavy with middle age and polemics ... with the delusion that they can vault, grave and unflappable, over the cars parked outside the theater'.

Bordwell's wryly humorous image captures a potent mimetic effect active in kung fu spectatorship, which involves a reorientation to the body and its possibilities and constitutes a moment of utopian fantasy in which the limits of the present conditions of life seem to fall away. But can this feeling of physical liberation be understood as in some respect actually emancipatory? This essay aims to investigate the *political* valence of such mimetic fantasy identifications – produced as they are through the collision of ostensibly ancient tradition and modern representational mechanisms, and through the complex histories through which the Chinese martial arts entered the modern world – histories in their turn conditioned within China's troubled entry into the order of global

modernity through the encounter with Western imperialism and its postcolonial aftermath.

The body-to-body transmission of a 'motion emotion' involved in Bordwell's mimetic fantasy suggests that, as Farrer and Whalen-Bridge (2011: 1) emphasise, the martial arts amount to a type of 'embodied knowledge', and one that is, in some regards, communicable. The implication of this for my questions about the politics of kung fu in its historical context, is that these may well be lodged in a corporeal pedagogy or transmission. Answering these questions will involve understanding the ways in which kung fu's cinematic representation echoes, extends or alters the pedagogies of the martial arts themselves.

In my exploration of these questions, I will foreground the notion of 'authenticity', which is a central term in the discourses surrounding kung fu film and modern Chinese martial arts themselves in spite – perhaps because – of the difficulties in establishing what is authentic in the spectacularised mass-media landscape of today. To deal with the corporeal authenticity and charisma of the kung fu star I will turn to the accounts of aura and authenticity in Walter Benjamin's late works. Bound as these are to questions of *Erfahrung* (experience), they offer a powerful way of understanding the nature – and politics – of an 'embodied knowledge' such as kung fu.

These approaches will open a discussion of the work of one of kung fu cinema's most innovative and influential directors, Lau Kar-leung, whose work entails an extended reflection on his position as a performer, choreographer and martial arts practitioner, on the kung fu traditions of which he is a part, and the forms of heritage within which these place him.

Authenticity in kung fu cinema

Before coming to Lau, however, a good place to start tracing the relations between performance, radical potential and authenticity is Leon Hunt's book *Kung Fu Cult Masters* (2003: 21-47). Hunt notes that questions of authenticity form a keynote of fan response to the kung fu genre. However, authenticity is a complex, heterogeneous notion, naming, amongst other things, a concern with the real danger involved in the stunts performed, the physical strength, agility and endurance of the performing bodies displayed on the screen, the transparency of the cinematic mediation of performance, and – last but not least – what Hunt calls '*archival authenticity*' (29): the relation of the movements made on screen to those of particular traditional systems of self-defence, with cinema conceived as a means to preserve and transmit potentially disappearing martial cultures.

The problem that Hunt thus faces is how to bind these different senses of the authentic together into a coherent concept. To attempt this, he leans suggestively – if all too briefly – on Benjamin's (1992: 211-244) famous essay on 'The Artwork in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility'.¹ In this, the notion of authenticity is tightly bound with the famous – if controversial – notion of aura. Benjamin begins his account of aura by describing it in terms of the physical 'unique presence in time and space' of objects. Such unique presence is 'the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity', and is what is lost in the reproduced image (214). However, Benjamin goes on to discuss the auratic as involving not only physical presence, but also indexical connection to an entire historical

¹ My rendition of its title into English is slightly more literal than the more usual 'Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', and also captures a concern taken up here with the problem of *different* forms of technology.

context: what is at play in the auratic object is 'all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced' (215). Benjamin's conception of aura thus serves Hunt as a neat trope which unites the material uniqueness, special talent, and physical reality of the kung-fu performer with ('archival') questions of the historical tradition and context from which their performance springs, whilst also providing a descriptive figure for the charisma that exudes so strongly from the most exceptional kung fu stars.

Hunt thus understands the kung fu performer (and the fan, too) as involved in the salvage of aura, in the context of the ever-exacerbated threat of its disappearance within the realm of technically reproduced images: a prolonged and deferred disappearance which, accompanied by the anxiety of loss, increasingly feeds the desire for aura's resuscitation within the field of reproducibility.

Hunt's thesis is lent further weight if we contrast Benjamin's account of the transformation of the nature of acting performance in the transition from stage to screen with the conventions of martial arts cinema. Benjamin's (1992: 222-7) descriptions of the ways in which the film actor's aura is alienated in the face of the technical apparatus – through the constructive editing and framing that place the director's decisions at the heart of the meaning and effect of a performance rather than the actor's skills – are closely paralleled in the anxieties expressed by martial arts fans, who insist on the prominence of performance over technical mediation, insisting that film should record and enhance performance rather than finding technical substitutes for it. (It is, after all,

possibly only martial arts fans who outdo Bazinian critics in their preference for long takes and deep focus!]²

Politics, aura and experience in Walter Benjamin

Hunt's account is descriptively compelling, but stops short of sustained reflection on its own political implications. To valorise a cinematic practice through the notion of aura may require further argumentation, given the Artwork essay's polemical position on the matter and Benjamin's anxieties about stardom as the synthesis of aura for purposes of capitalist manipulation and even fascist aestheticisation (224).

This said, many critics argue that the Artwork essay's 'programmatic tenor ... cannot be taken at face value' (Hansen 1987: 180) and that there is a systematic 'radical ambivalence' (McCole 1993: 8) which undermines its seemingly polemical stance against aura and for a politicised, anti-auratic culture of the image. And whilst the Artwork essay seems to critique aura as an atavism that holds us bound to repressive forces of myth, in the pieces that Benjamin wrote alongside it – especially the work on Leskov, Baudelaire and Proust (Benjamin 1992: 83-107, 152-196, 197-210) – the passing of the auratic dimension of culture, particularly where linked to memory, tradition and experience, seems more a matter for mourning than celebration.

In particular, 'The Storyteller' gives us a more valorised version of aura. This was written in 1936 after Benjamin had completed the first version of the

² Lau Kar-leung, as a proponent of an 'archival' kung fu cinema (and one of Hunt's key examples of this) is much loved by kung fu aficionados for his insistence on long takes and full-body shots, making the performance of the stars central, and displaying in as clear a manner as possible the movements which they perform.

Artwork essay, and in John McCole's (1993: 9) words forms with it 'a pair of essays governed by an inner law of complementarity, however tense and paradoxical'. Here, the oral literature of pre-modern storytellers (sunk as it is into a past of telling and retelling) is compared positively to the more individualistic form of the novel. McCole argues that in 'The Storyteller' the disintegration of aura involves the erasure of a 'historical depth' and 'full historical testimony' that modern forms such as the novel can no longer produce. Preserving such historical testimony, the 'authentic', auratic object remains polyvalent, open, dialectical, and retains the power to explode, rather than merely confirm, the continuum of the present (6-7).

It is in particular through Benjamin's notion of *Erfahrung* that we can understand this explosive power of an auratic relation to the past. *Erfahrung*, a mode of life and learning in which experience is slowly layered into the subject – and the cultural object or text – involves unconscious accumulation, not only on the part of the individual but over generations of practice. These unconsciously accumulated contents, if repressed within a given historical moment, can return, unexpectedly and involuntarily, on the present, in a revolutionary flash, in the same way Proust's childhood famously returns when he tastes a madeleine dipped in tea. To lose this connection to the past preserved in the auratic object is to be condemned to the sameness of the present, and to find oneself dispossessed of the difference on which the utopian imagination depends in order to envision a better world.

Benjamin today?

Such anxieties about the hollowing out of the past have been articulated by critics such as Fredric Jameson (1991) as having, in the years since Benjamin was writing, become an increasing danger, with historical memory flattening itself into the simulacral databases of a globalised, fragmented media-and-information culture without time or place. Drawing on such analyses of the present, Lutz Koepnik (2002: 97) has found the 'ubiquitous perseverance of auratic elements' in contemporary culture a not-altogether-negative phenomenon. His argument notes some of the ways in which the conditions under which Benjamin wrote the Artwork essay have reversed since the 1930s. 'Mass' forms of media address have been replaced by the 'niche' products of the internet, TV-on-demand or the personal stereo. Commodified culture increasingly appears as atomising rather than a shared public realm. The modes of rational 'testing', 'expertise' and 'distracted' consumption that Benjamin praised appear increasingly in harmony with the needs of pseudo-individuation, instrumentalisation and depoliticisation (Koepnik 2002: 108-9). As another writer has put it, 'nothing is more questionable today than Benjamin's hope that the concepts he elaborates [in the Artwork essay] are incompatible with Fascist aesthetics' (Siegert 2003: 37).

For Koepnik, in such contemporary circumstances the demand for aura and authenticity stands as a counterforce to the abstraction, atomisation and instrumentalisation of social relations central to the processes of late capitalism. Authenticity now presents itself as a potential basis for the formation of the subjectivities and collectivities through which capital might be resisted and another life constructed (Koepnik 2002: 107-12). Such arguments would open the possibility of returning the political dimension of Benjamin's work to Hunt's

affirmations of authenticity in kung fu cinema, in terms of both physical performance and also links to a 'deep' historical past.³

Kung fu's radical credentials

Alongside the exceptionally popular nature of its audience (Glaessner 1974: 10, 15), kung fu's connection to older strands of folk culture may be one of the things that might most immediately allow us to read it as (like the orally transmitted stories Benjamin lauds) maintaining such forms of potentially radical, rather than merely fascist-aestheticising, relations to auratic tradition. The population of Hong Kong grew massively during the mid-twentieth century, with floods of refugees, largely from Guandong, seeking to escape the political turmoil of the mainland. A largely rural population was thus brought suddenly – and, in relation to the West, belatedly – into a rapidly urbanising, heavily capitalised milieu, quickly becoming proletarianised. With technologies of mass culture already in a relatively mature form at this stage, they were soon provided with an industrially produced culture, but they also brought still-familiar stories and cultural forms with them from the countryside, and these provided material on which the new manufactured culture could draw to engage its audiences.

Kung fu (and the histories and legends that have accrued around it) has played a significant part in this popular culture. The arts of war are perhaps most intuitively accounted for as a part of state machineries of domination and imperial expansion. MT Kato (2007:42-3), however, has argued that in the Asian

³ That this may be the case would seem particularly obvious in the case of the way that kung fu and its cinematic portrayals serve to create highly national/ethnic forms of identity in the context of a colonial/postcolonial world order (Teo 1997: 110-121), but we can also see the pasts that return as having a relevance and meaning within the formation of the kind of global subjectivity of struggle from below sought by Vijay Prashad (2002).

martial arts, there is a strong counter-tradition embedded in popular resistance and revolt, in the self-defence of the weak against the strong, and even against the state. His key example is Okinawan karate,⁴ but in China, too, the martial arts have, since at least the Yellow Turban peasant revolt of 184AD and right up to the Boxer Rebellion of 1899-1901, been part of an entangled complex of popular unrest, social banditry, secret political societies, heterodox cults and mystical practices.

Such resistant arts of defence have had a special place within Hong Kong's popular culture, and within the kung fu cinema that grew there in the 1970s. These films are most frequently set in the milieu of resistance to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century occupation of China by the Manchurian Qing dynasty, and to the growing Western imperial exploitation of this time. In particular, there is a prominent cluster around the heroes who are reputed to have survived the burning of the Fujian Shaolin Temple by the Qing army, and to have set out to spread the Shaolin martial arts as arts of resistance throughout Southern China (Hunt 2003: 49-52).

Lau Kar-leung, storytelling, and the Shaolin ancestors

One of the key figures in the development of such a theme was Lau Kar-leung. Lau is often credited (Hunt, 2003: 23, 29, 32-4; Yu 1999: 84; Marchetti 2006; Assayas and Tesson 2000) as introducing, in the swordplay films of the 1960s, a more 'realistic' mode of fighting, less reliant on wires, trampolines and a set routine of opera tricks, and increasingly based on the 'authentic' martial arts of

⁴ Karate, its name literally signifying an art of the 'empty hand' originated in an era of Japanese occupation in which it was illegal for Okinawans to carry weapons.

Southern China in which he was, in fact, a master and lineage holder quite outside of his work in film.⁵ Lau became increasingly a collaborator rather than a mere fight choreographer in the films he made with the influential director Chang Cheh, and it was Lau who persuaded Chang to shift to making films about the Cantonese Shaolin heroes, sparking off a whole cinematic sub-genre (Assayas and Tesson 2000).⁶ In these films the spectacle of the particularity and performance of the Southern-Chinese Shaolin arts was made an increasingly central element (Marchetti 2006: 74-5).

Lau, furthermore, traces his martial lineage back, from teacher to teacher, to the mythical destruction of the Shaolin Temple and the very folk heroes so often represented in the films he choreographed and directed (Assayas and Tesson 2000). Gina Marchetti (2006) goes as far as to read the negotiation of this lineage and the problems of inheritance as the primary theme of Lau's directorial work.⁷ In tracing itself to the Shaolin rebels, the art presented in the films is itself

⁵ Lau made a splash as the choreographer for *The Jade Bow* (1966), made by Great Wall, a small Communist-backed studio, the relatively gritty fight scenes of which drew in large audiences. He was then hired by Shaw Brothers, the largest of the Hong Kong studios, to work with director Chang Cheh on a number of films that defined the 'New Swordplay' films of the late 60s, such as *The One-Armed Swordsman* (1967), *The Assassin* (1967) and *Golden Swallow* (1968), with their aesthetic of Technicolor blood, graphic violence, and dynamically performed fight sequences.

⁶ The Shaolin films on which Chang and Lau collaborated include *Men from the Monastery* (1974), *Heroes Two* (1974), *Five Shaolin Masters* (1974) and *Shaolin Martial Arts* (1974). Lau went on to direct himself *Executioners from Shaolin* (1977), *36th Chamber of Shaolin* (1978), *Return to the 36th Chamber* (1980) and *Disciples of the 36th Chamber* (1985), all of which pick up on the same characters and events as the films he made with Chang. They were also followed by a host of other films too numerous to mention, some by Chang with other fight directors, and some by other directors entirely.

⁷ Lau's father's teacher was Lam Sai-wing, who was in turn taught by Wong Fei-hung, a patriotic hero highly celebrated in Cantonese folklore. Wong is the subject of two of Lau's films, *Challenge of the Masters* (1976) and *Martial Club* (1981). Wong's teacher Luk Ah Choi (who also appears in *Challenge of the Masters*) was one of the mythical Shaolin Temple survivors, and of course appears in a number of the Shaolin Temple films. *Executioners from Shaolin* tells the story of Hung Hei-gun, the legendary founder and namesake of Hung Gar, and teacher/co-student of Luk. The *36th Chamber* films take us a generation further back to the Shaolin monk San Te, who is depicted undergoing

a 'revolutionary' one. Embedded in Cantonese folklore, Lau's style, Hung Gar ('Hung Family' style), traces its roots back to the martial artist Hung Hei-gun – repeatedly a hero in Lau's and Chang's Shaolin films, and reputedly the most senior of the students who escaped the burning of the temple to spread its kung fu amongst Southern-Chinese rebel organisations. As Marchetti (2006: 80) notes, 'Hung' in fact was on his part an adopted, symbolic name that linked him to these organisations. It references the reign name of the Emperor who led a peasant uprising to overthrow the Mongolian occupation of China and found the Ming dynasty. Making the same reference, Hung Mun was also the name of the anti-Qing secret society with which Hung Hei-gun was associated, and in this regard Hung Gar also means – explicitly to a Cantonese audience – the martial art used by this group of revolutionaries.⁸

One of the interesting characteristics of this art for my own argument is that it not only involved utilitarian forms of self-defence, but also incorporated, to a high degree, an element of showmanship – a fact not unusual in insurrectionary kung fu styles, forming an important element, for example in the repertoire of the Yihuetuan (the 'Boxer Rebellion') or the messianic White Lotus

tutelage from the Abbot Chi San and teaching a band of Cantonese anti-Qing rebels, including Luk and Hung. Other films delve deeper into Lau's 'lineage' and its myths, with, for example, *The 8-Diagram Pole Fighter* (1984) returning to the tenth-century Yang family spearmen who protected China's borders against Liao invaders, and in particular to the story of 'Fifth Brother' Yang, who after the betrayal and defeat of his family entered the Shaolin monastery and transformed his spear style into a style of staff fighting that then became the basis for the pole art practised by Lau's own lineage.

⁸ The Hung Mun (or *Hongmen* in Mandarin), also known as the *Tiandihui* ('Heaven and Earth Society') formed the root of the present-day 'triad'. Whether or not the Hong Mun was actually in its origins primarily a political organisation, a criminal gang, or a mutual aid network is something of a matter of controversy. However, the group was certainly significantly involved in a number of anti-Qing revolts, and was strongly mobilised by Sun Yat-sen. It's perhaps because of this co-optation within the Republican cause that the Hung Mun's own mythology also traces its roots to survivors of the sacking of the Shaolin Temple (even if these seem to be a different group of 'sole' survivors!). There is thus a significant parallel between the founding myths of a number of key martial arts styles and that of the triad. (See Murray and Qin 1994.)

sect which was repeatedly implicated in uprisings throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁹ The theatricality of public displays of strength and agility were a means to drum up enthusiasm for a revolutionary cause, serving as a means of recruitment (Marchetti 2006: 77). The Hung Mun revolutionaries, furthermore, at least as recorded in kung fu's popular mythologies, often travelled as street performers and operatic troupes, giving them cover to move around and the opportunity to insert subversively political narratives into their spectacles.

Lau's film *Executioners from Shaolin* (1977), for example, depicts Hung Hei-gun using the 'red boats' of Cantonese opera companies as a hidden communications network, and to allow Hung Mun guerrillas to disappear into the fabric of everyday life. In one scene (See Fig. 1), Hung's troupe stages a performance using the characteristic acrobatic and martial-arts elements of Chinese opera to tell a tale of past patriotic heroes in order to stir up anti-Qing sentiment. Such a depiction of the martial arts as integrated into forms of spectacular entertainment, and these entertainments in their turn telling stories of heroic resistance from the past, marks a striking moment of cinematic self-reflexivity in which Lau's films themselves find their equivalent in the *mis en abyme* operatic performance. Lau seems to be saying something not only about the history of Hung Gar, but also about its long entwinement with entertainment. And if such a film, whose protagonist is Lau's own grand-grand-grand-grand-grand-master, has a clear concern with his lineage as a martial artist, it also proposes a genealogy for martial arts cinema itself, making a striking implicit

⁹ The milieu of the Boxer Rebellion – and the problem of 'true' kung fu versus stage tricks – is the subject of Lau's *Legendary Weapons of China* (1982).

claim about the political significance of this film's own depictions of heroic resistance against all odds, and about the subversive meaning of its on-screen Hung Gar performances.

[Fig 1. 'You can kill me but you can never kill all my comrades!' – Hung Hei-gun's opera troupe put on a subversive opera representing resistance against tyranny in *Executioners from Shaolin* (dir. Lau Kar-leung, 1977) © Celestial Pictures. Video still.]

As involved in such showmanship, Hung Gar is intertwined with a kind of *storytelling* that might bring us back to the terms of Benjamin's essay, and also remind us of the way that Farrer and Whalen-Bridge characterise martial arts as carriers of 'embodied knowledge'. Hung Gar is not only the subject of a series of popular narratives and not only has within its tradition a series of tellings of its own history, but is itself also a medium for their dissemination. In such a martial art, theatrical to the core, pedagogy and performance become indistinguishable from the construction and transmission of its narratives and myths. Lau's oeuvre, an extended meditation on the histories, myths and heroes of Hung Gar, extends their telling from the training hall into the cinema. With its theatrics and its entwinement with folk narrative, Lau's Hung Gar came ready-adapted to the needs of a Hong Kong cinema deeply popular in both its audience and its repertoire of tales and storytelling modes (Bordwell 2000: 7-12).

At this point, I can already begin to make a certain claim about the political valence of Lau's cinema, and the performances of kung fu within it. In such films, the exhilarating charge of corporeal identification David Bordwell

describes becomes a medium through which a pedagogy takes place, and this pedagogy is political in nature.

There is a clear intent in Lau's films to teach his audience about kung fu. Its movements are displayed and explicated, along with the differences between styles, and even (as we have seen in the case of *Executioners from Shaolin*) their histories and the socio-political contexts of their development. Details and uses of different weapons are explained, as in *Heroes of the East* (1979), where the scenario (a lover's tiff between a Chinese husband and Japanese wife, both martial arts enthusiasts) is little more than a conceit to catalogue (through a series of dazzling performances) the differences between a series of national variations in basic weapons such as spears, swords, knives and projectiles, and the different techniques that have developed for these.

In many of Lau's films a lesson given to a character within the film becomes a means to make the audience, too, into pupils (and hence to interpellate us within the lineages of descent his films recount). In *Heroes of the East*, the protagonist Ho Tai (Gordon Liu) seeks out the legendary Beggar So, to try to learn his Drunken Boxing as a 'soft' style to counter 'hard' karate. As So is notorious for refusing to teach his art, Ho decides to trick him, getting a group of classmates to pretend to assault him and force him to use his martial art, whilst Ho watches and learns. Beggar So – played by Lau Kar-leung himself – spots the ruse, but decides to give a virtuoso demonstration. Of course, the display is not just for the sake of Ho, who, watching from the sidelines, and mimicking the master's movements to the best of his ability (Fig. 2), becomes a stand-in for the cinema viewer, the real recipient of Lau's masterclass. Afterwards, Ho, returning home, ruminates on the movements he's seen, mimicking them as he walks down

the street. Just like Bordwell imagining jumping over cars after exiting a film, his body is possessed by the images he has seen.

[Fig. 2: Ho Tai (Gordon Liu) mimics Beggar So (Lau Kar-leung). Video still from *Heroes of the East* (1979) © Celestial Pictures.]

Lau's films, in fact, increasingly placed a thematised depiction of kung fu pedagogy at their heart. This started with the Shaolin films he made with Chang, which pioneered increasingly extended training sequences. However, his own *36th Chamber of Shaolin* (1978) is probably the definitive 'training film', having at its core a twenty-minute sequence in which the film's hero, the monk San Te, moves through the syllabus of the Shaolin Temple (leaping water, carrying buckets, striking bells with unfeasibly long hammers to build wrist and arm strength, headbutting sandbags, and mastering a plethora of fist and weapon styles) to come out not only physically but also ethically and spiritually transformed. The extended scenes of the ordeals of training only serve to increase the intensity of Bordwellian mimetic identification through their masochistic pleasures.

[Fig. 3 Masochistic pleasures of identification – Gordon Liu carries buckets of water in the iconic training sequence. Video Still from *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin* (1978) © Celestial Pictures.]

It's not, however, primarily how to kick or punch that is 'taught' in Lau's pedagogy. The 'embodied knowledge' here is an ethic, and one strongly coded as

an ethic of resistance. San Te leaves the Shaolin Temple to set up a new school – the ‘36th Chamber’ of the film’s title – in which ordinary people outside the monastic order can learn Shaolin martial arts in order to resist their oppression at the hands of foreign (Manchurian) rulers. Lau’s movies themselves, with their pedagogical intent, might perhaps be understood as a kind of a ‘37th Chamber’, spreading kung fu beyond the traditionally closed doors of the training hall (with all the political ramifications that its mimesis of San Te’s act of democratisation entails).

Such an account of a resistant, radical or emancipatory aspect to at least some kung fu films, however, remains dependent on a particular, contingent narrative they tell; I would like to make a stronger case for a radicality at the heart of the kung fu genre itself. One way of doing this – at which I can do little more than gesture here due to limitations of space – would be to consider the postcolonial nature of this cinema. Bordwell’s visions of ‘grave and unflappable’ car-vaulting as he leaves the cinema chime strangely with the car-vaulting in Frantz Fanon’s (2001: 40) account, in his famous apologia for anti-colonial violence, of the ‘dreams’ that are activated under conditions of colonial brutality. Echoing the contents of kung fu cinema, these are ‘always of muscular prowess; the [colonised subject’s] dreams are of action and aggression. I dream I am jumping, swimming, running, climbing ... that I span a river in one stride or that I am followed by a flood of motor cars which can never catch up with me’. That kung fu cinema echoes these fantasy tropes is unsurprising given its origins in still-colonial Hong Kong, with its grinding poverty and all the corporeal effects of largely unregulated factory labour.

Beyond the particular colonial conditions of Hong Kong, when read in terms of Fanon's psychology of the oppressed, it's also easy to see such fantasies as carrying with them, into the global scene of kung fu spectatorship, a potent charge, where taking up kung fu itself so often is, in the words of Farrer (2011: 206) 'a strategy of resistance employed to counter the negative effects of the socioeconomic order' and to remedy the 'injurious experiences' that 'result for the great mass of people from the daily grind for survival'. Thought about this way, the reality of global, Neoliberal capital may be understood as amounting to what Farrer terms a 'chronic trauma', much less intense than colonial brutality, but pervasive nonetheless. The 'trauma' here might also recall the recurrent, disorienting shocks to which Benjamin sees the modern city dweller and factory worker as subject.¹⁰

It may be hardly surprising that under such conditions, the vision of corporeal de-alienation and emancipation harboured in kung fu performance appeals so strongly even to film professors, grown as they are, under the yoke of the professional life of the infotariat (however privileged), 'heavy with middle age and polemics'. If we accept such a postcolonial reading of the pleasures and fantasy scenes of kung fu performance, it would also start to make Lau's foregrounding of the radical histories of kung fu seem rather less contingent with regard to their aesthetic form. It would link such form to the more general tropes of the genre, where, consistently, rebel heroes from the underclasses forcibly resist the violent tyranny of the rich and powerful.

The way, however, that I would like in the space left here to develop an account of the political significance of the film form of kung fu cinema, is to

¹⁰ See especially his work on Baudelaire (1992: 152-190).

return to Walter Benjamin's 'Storyteller' and consider the complex of aura, authenticity, experience, cultural memory and technology which I have discussed above, and that I would argue is at stake in a martial arts cinema such as Lau's, having as it does one foot in folk traditions of resistance.

Benjamin: performance, technology, body, freedom

I have already hinted at an initial approach by noting a relation between the form of an art such as Hung Gar and storytelling. Martial arts are, of course, orally transmitted from master to pupil over generations, just like the folk tales Benjamin admires.

Telling stories is an integral aspect of the teaching of most traditional styles of kung fu (Farrer 2011). Such stories (often, just like the stories Lau's films tell, about the founders and heroes of an art) frequently have a dual purpose. On the one hand they tie the listener into a history, telling them about a founding gesture, and placing them within a chain of tellings of the story. Furthermore, however, they often offer the student practical advice on the execution, study and character of the art. Interestingly, the tales told (and the instructions given more generally in martial arts teaching) are akin to the Benjaminian story: unlike 'information', with which Benjamin (1992: 89) contrasts it, a story is not 'shot through with explanation'. Stories (and martial arts instructions) are, instead, complex, enigmatic things that require further thought. They are not exhausted by any explanation a teacher or teller gives. They exist as depth-figures rather than exhaustible and easily digestible bites of fact. To only slightly adapt Benjamin's account of the story, martial arts

instruction often ‘does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, but sinks the thing into the life of the [student], in order to bring it out of him again’ (91).

Because of this, repetition is key in the telling, memorisation and practice of instructions, and like the story the martial arts require a ‘process of assimilation, which takes place in depth’ (90). It is, perhaps, this deep sinking of tradition into the body through repetition that Lau hymns in his extended training sequences. Like the story, kung fu involves a layering and transmission of experience that weaves a subject into the past, providing an integrity which is annihilated in the modern regime of information and its fragmentary *Erlebnisse*.¹¹ Such a relation to memory would make sense of the close relation of martial arts to storytelling practices.

Would it even be too forceful to translate *kung fu* as *Erfahrung* – as ‘experience’ or even ‘embodied knowledge’? In Chinese, the word *kung fu* does not have a privileged relation to the martial arts. It means, more literally, ‘skill’ or ‘achievement’, and (including the character for ‘work’) implies an artisanal skill, achieved over a long period of hard work and dedicated study. One may have ‘kung fu’ in cooking, carpentry, making tea or arranging flowers, as well as fighting.

The martial arts, then, belong to a rather different regime of technology to that of the present, the same artisanal regime with which Benjamin (1992: esp. 91-2, 106-7) repeatedly associates the storyteller. In fact, the obsoletely artisanal

¹¹ Though *Erlebniss* and *Erfahrung* are both often translated into English as ‘experience’, the two have – especially in Benjamin’s use of them – quite different significances. *Erlebnisse*, mere ‘experiences’ that remain generally external to the subject and are never fully integrated into the being of the subject, are characteristic of modern ways of life, whilst *Erfahrung*, which Benjamin associates more with older, artisanal forms of life, involves a more deep absorption of life and memory into the self. With *Erlebnisse*, one only has a set of experiences (collected like tourist photos or souvenirs), whilst with *Erfahrung* one becomes expert, *experienced*.

nature of the martial arts, in an era of technologised war, is often an explicit theme in kung fu films. Lau's *Legendary Weapons of China* (1982), for example, is set within a cell of a cultic organisation during the Boxer Rebellion, which is disintegrating in the face of the uselessness of its 'iron shirt' *qigong* (meant to provide its practitioner with invulnerability to blows) in the face of Western guns.

This very obsolescence, however, may account in part for the contemporary attraction of the idea of the martial arts. In his *Arcades* project, Benjamin (2002) reminds us that a radical potential sleeps in objects and practices outmoded by capitalism's restless processes of change. Kung fu figures as an unalienated craft of physical power or force which – even if it takes great labour and determination to master – still resides at the level of the individual and their will, rather than on the level of the state or the military-industrial complex, as do contemporary military technologies. In this regard kung fu gives us a counter-image to the forms of power, violence and control within which the modern subject finds itself ensnared.

Miriam Hansen (2002: 44) has argued that there is a fundamental antinomy in Benjamin's late work. On the one hand is an optimism with regard to modern technology, embracing this as liberating humanity from the grip of the stabilising forces of 'myth', tradition, authority and aura that retard progress along the path to freedom. On the other hand, there is the more pessimistic Benjamin I have been drawing on here, who laments the loss of the aura, authenticity and artisanship that fostered *Erfahrung*. Here, modern technology and the forces of capitalist abstraction and instrumentalisation that it

concretizes threaten to alienate the deepest recesses of the self and reduce it to an object of manipulation and exploitation in a dehumanised universe.

The danger of drawing overly on this last position is that we may be drawn into a nostalgia for ‘authenticity’ that *can* serve profoundly reactionary purposes. Written in the shadow of the rise of Nazism, Benjamin’s Artwork essay (in probably the gesture by which Benjamin is best known within cultural and media studies debates) warned against the way the artwork’s aura was being re-inserted into mass-culture as a means to retard its more radical potential, ‘making it harmless for the existing system of domination’ (Markus 2009: 122), and even bolstering an appeal to tradition that served to stabilise order and reinforce hierarchy.

There may even be an argument for seeing this kind of ‘fascist aestheticisation’ in martial arts films. Think of Riefenstahl’s *Olympia* (1936); and then Zhang Yimou’s staging of the 2008 Peking games’ opening ceremony; and then the grandiose staging of national myth in his *Hero* (2002), which amounts, perhaps, to a kind of rehearsal for the Olympic spectacle. Evans Chan (2009: 263-4) has gone so far as to characterise this film as a ‘pernicious apology for a (post)totalitarian regime’.¹² Perhaps the seeds of such a cinema are already there both in the film and martial arts culture of 70s Hong Kong, appealing to a nascent nationalism, aestheticising violence, privileging hegemonic forms of masculinity, and frequently appealing to traditional Confucian values in the face of modernisation.

¹² Zhang’s film, though certainly it exists on the territory of a fascist myth-building of the kind that Benjamin feared, perhaps avoids the full force of Chan’s charge inasmuch as its narrative structure problematises and reflects on the problems of the creation, transmission and retelling of myth itself.

This, however, would at most be half of the story. In the spirit of Benjamin, martial arts cinema would need to be treated much more dialectically. Read in the fullness of his antinomies, Benjamin would suggest that fascist aestheticisation is by no means the inevitable outcome or the essential truth of the auratic, of authenticity, or of the forms of technology and experience with which these are associated, and that these also have, as I have been describing here, a kernel of radicality.

Lau's films often align themselves with (and provide evidence of) such a progressive strain in martial arts cultures. Their relation to tradition – unlike the cultural work that Benjamin associates with fascism – is complex and playful. If a chief concern of his oeuvre is the transmission of tradition, Lau's films also consistently problematise this, being interested as much in moments of innovation as they are in continuity. Martial arts knowledge is not depicted as final or fixed, as one might expect in a 'traditional' culture, subject to the terrible sway of Benjaminian myth, whose technical solutions are 'valid once and for all'. Rather Lau's kung fu is 'wholly provisional' and operates 'by means of experiments and endlessly varied test procedures' – just as Benjamin characterises more progressive technological formations (Benjamin 2008: 26).

Almost all of Lau's films, in fact, are structured around a crisis in the line of transmission, and an act of radical rethinking. In some, this takes the form of the miscegenation of arts: tiger and crane boxing in *Executioners from Shaolin*, for example, or internal and external styles in *Shaolin vs Wudang* (1983).¹³ In

¹³ This last film is not technically directed by Lau, but he is listed on hkmdb.com as its action director and producer. Directed by Gordon Liu (Lau's martial brother, his favourite leading man, and godson of his parents) the film certainly belongs to the 'extended family' of Lau's oeuvre, and it bears the stamp of his idiom throughout.

others it involves play, experiment and empirical observation, as with San Te's invention of the three-sectioned staff in *36th Chamber of Shaolin* (1978), a hinged weapon whose joints are inspired by the properties of bamboo when broken (Fig. 4).

[Fig. 4: Innovation in action – San Te (Gordon Liu) invents a three-sectioned staff, observing the properties of bamboo. Video Still from *36th Chamber of Shaolin* (dir. Lau Kar-leung, 1978) © Celestial Pictures.]

In many films, the protagonists are tricksterish and rebellious rather than simply respectful towards authority, and remain outsiders with regard to the tradition they embody. *Return to the 36th Chamber* (1980) is typical of the depiction of such a problematised relation to authority. At the outset of the film, its hero, Chu Jen-chieh (Gordon Liu) is a drifter and a layabout. When his friends are bullied and exploited by oppressive Manchurian bosses in their dyeing factory, Chu decides to pose as a Shaolin monk to frighten the oppressors into relenting their behaviour. When he's found out, he gets badly beaten and decides to go to Shaolin to learn real martial arts. However, in spite of repeatedly trying to trick his way into the monastery, Chu is repeatedly ejected, and never becomes accepted into martial training. He does, however, spend a year building scaffolding for the temple, and whilst doing so observes the monks at their practice, combining what he sees with the movements of his work with the bamboo scaffolding poles to forge a new martial art ('scaffolding kung fu'), which he then uses to return to the factory and defeat his foes. He thus learns, but without being taught, actively remaking the martial arts. He never takes on the

discipleship that the strict structure of the monastery would require of him, and becomes a peculiarly illegitimate – but nonetheless authentic – heir to its transmission.

As Gina Marchetti (2006) has noted, in many films the break with tradition is thematised around gender, with the feminine appearing as a transgressive – but also profoundly productive and transformational – force that disturbs an otherwise degenerating male order of patrilineal descent. In *Executioners from Shaolin*, for example, Hung Hei-gun is ultimately unable to get his revenge on the evil Pai Mei for the destruction of the Shaolin Temple. Hung is defeated and killed by Pai Mei in part because he stubbornly refuses to relinquish his patriarchal tradition ('that's the way we've always done it!'), refusing to learn his wife's crane-style kung fu to supplement his own – highly masculine – tiger style, transmitted to him down a male line. The pure masculinity of Hung's kung fu is countered by the uncanny femininity of Pai Mei – who sucks his testicles up into his body to make them invulnerable to attack, and even uses the hollowed out genitalia (become a monstrous *vagina dentata*) to trap and hold Hung's leg whilst he kills him. It thus falls to Hung's son, Wen-ting to complete his father's task. Wen-ting wears pigtails like a girl for much of the film, and like Liu in *Return the the 36th Chamber*, plays the trickster in contrast to his father the stern patrician that Chen acts so well (very much in the mould of the macho heroes of the Chang Cheh film in which both he and Lau first gained their fame).

[Fig. 5: Patriarchy as a rotten tradition – the Hung family tiger boxing manual, eaten by rats. Video still from *Executioners from Shaolin* (dir. Lau Kar-leung, 1977) © Celestial Pictures.]

Wen-ting does combine his mother's martial art with his father's, though the latter has to be reconstructed as he has not learned it. Or, more than reconstructed, it has to be reinvented as the book in which it is recorded – in an allegory of the degradation of the art itself and of its forms of patrilineal tradition – has been eaten by rats, and become largely illegible. It is with this mixture of paternal and maternal, the 'male' and 'female', tradition and invention that he beats Pai Mei's own gender-bending martial art. If the hypermachismo of kung fu filmmakers such as Bruce Lee and Chang Cheh were involved in reclaiming a Chinese 'masculinity' in the face of a longstanding feminisation of the Asian in Orientalist discourse – and perhaps in doing so played back into the hands of 'mythic' patriarchal structures – Lau seems to give us something a little more dialectical, open and 'at play' in his negotiation of both gender and tradition, something that might evade the grasp of the 'mythic' power of tradition in its most negative sense.

Conclusion

In this essay, then, I have been arguing that Benjamin's accounts of experience, aura and authenticity, especially as given in 'The Storyteller', complicate the polemical position often drawn out of his famous 'Artwork' essay. They open a way to understanding the 'embodied knowledge' of Chinese martial arts as providing a heterologous figure with regards to the alienating forces of

modernity. Benjamin offers me a resource for understanding the fantasies that surround these, and that send people to the kung fu movie and the training hall alike (and from the cinema to the dojo), as more than a regressive form of nostalgia. In the films of Lau Kar-leung in particular – one of kung fu cinema's most thoughtful and thematically interesting directors as well as one of its most influential – we see how filmic expression is woven into and extends a complex of martial arts pedagogies, their oral/corporeal transmission, and a 'storytelling' culture that cuts across the teaching of martial arts and wider forms of 'folk' memory. Such popular stories, I have been arguing, have served as a resistant counter-memory that retains the stamp of the struggle from below against the vagaries of the rich and powerful more generally, but more specifically of experiences of occupation and colonial or semicolonial subjugation.

I have been arguing that these roots of the martial arts film – in ancient customs of resistance as well as more modern postcolonial experience – do not only allow it to speak to a Chinese context. In discussing the ancient story, Benjamin (1992: 90) likens it to 'the seeds of grain that have lain for centuries in the chambers of the pyramids shut up air-tight and have retained their germinative power to this day'. The kernels of experience hidden in kung fu culture, blown on the winds of the global media, resonate within the experiences of the impoverishment of experience and of the subjection to forces alienation, abstraction and instrumentalisation of transnational, neoliberal forms of capital. The kung-fu film, I have argued, is one example of the way that the energies, desires and memories of the past find some kind of way – however weak and compromised – into the present of popular culture.

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