

Re-Enter The Dragon

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Enter the Discourse

In 1973 the Bruce Lee film, *Enter the Dragon* was released. This East-West co-production was unlike anything the Western world at large had ever seen. Well, actually, that's not quite true: in many respects, it was exactly like many things the Western world at large had often seen: it was, after all, just another cheesy, formulaic action flick, essentially repeating a James Bond format. However, one thing about it was different: Bruce Lee.

Indeed, so different was Lee that this formulaic film changed things. Its effects were transformative. It was *an event* – And with the word 'event' I mean to evoke all of the resonances and associations that both Badiou and Rancière attribute to 'events'. Of course, as a *cinematic* event, this complex technological simulacrum of a text cannot be located in or limited to merely one of the four measly regions that Badiou thinks an event has to be located in or limited to in order to be an event. Yet an event it was: aesthetic, at least; political, immanently.

But, of course, as cinematic simulation, although it masqueraded as a putatively 'Eastern' graft into or onto Western popular culture and consciousness, the film was

a 'simulacral event', but one that *nevertheless* founded a new discourse, a new set of discourses, a new field of discursivity.

As a founder of discursivity, *Enter the Dragon* spearheaded the widespread introduction of a whole family of new terms into Western – indeed global – popular culture (martial arts, karate-do, 'black belt', kung fu, Shaolin Temple, Shaolin Monk) and a whole new set of connections and associations (Zen and pugilism, Buddhism and battle, meditation and martial arts, fighting warrior monks). Into Western popular consciousness it punched a paradigm, a whole new aesthetic vocabulary, a whole new perceptual-aesthetic field, a reconfiguration of what Jacques Rancière has termed the 'partition of the perceptible'.

It completed the countercultural fascination with the 'mystical East', and it *supplemented* it – it *sublated* it – reconfiguring and superseding it: Rising out from the mush of mystical mumbo-jumbo circulating in Western discourses about the soft, feminine Eastern Other arose many things: new embodied, philosophico-haptic, kinetic, perceptual and aesthetic performative practices; new interests in the East; new asiaphilias, projections and self-orientalisations; plus nothing short of a whole new mode of masculinity: not the hulking hero, the cowboy gun-slinger, the bar-room brawler, or the cop, spy or soldier, but now the invincible martial artist monk, created through hard work, self-discipline and the means of correct training; new mindsets, new bodysets, and whole new sets of fantasies about self and other; about the very intimate and the very far; about new aims and possibilities; new fantasies about the very old and very other brought very near and very new.

Enter the Dragon was an event. Not an isolated event, but the pinnacle of a series of interventions.

Studies have often focused on explaining the unexpectedly intense and immense appeal of Hong Kong martial arts films among poor black and Hispanic audiences in American inner cities and elsewhere around the world. This encounter was contingent: caused by the fact that Hong Kong films were cheap to show, so the poorer cinemas in poorer areas could afford to show them. Moreover, from 1967, the Hong Kong film industry had been deliberately seeking to break the US market.

But the consequences of this contingent encounter were profound. Thinkers from Charles Johnson to Bill Brown to Gina Marchetti have treated it at length. With much more blasé brevity, Slavoj Žižek has also proposed that the first reason for the strong appeal of martial arts films in ghettos the world over was initially class-based. Those who have nothing, writes Žižek, have only their bodies, only their discipline, only their desire. And ‘class’ is of course easily transcoded into the terms and registers of ethnicity, and vice versa.

Moreover: Bruce Lee exploded into popularity across Asia, India, Europe, the US, the Soviet Union – everywhere. Vijay Prashad recalls that Lee politicized consciousness in India – the small yellow man beating big whitey. T. M. Kato argues that Lee offered an anti-colonial and decolonizing aesthetic, an antidote to the stifling situation in which Africans watching Tarzan would cheer *for* Tarzan and against the caricatured African tribesmen. Bill Brown argues that it was Lee’s ‘generic ethnicity’ that sparked, fuelled and oiled his massive popularity and enduring significance.

However, over time, write both Žižek and Bill Brown, immanent class antagonism became existentialized: martial arts became about self-actualisation, about realising self-potential, about uncovering existential paradoxes (about meditative or pacifist martial arts) – or, that is, depoliticized on one level and ideologized on another.

Enter the Dragon was the exploding of all of this into the mainstream. This pinnacle was clearly in some contexts a depoliticization. In others it was an outright affront: Hong Kong audiences reputedly hated *Enter the Dragon*, because in it Bruce Lee plays not a rural mainland Chinese working class boy, but a Western projection of a fantasy of a Shaolin Monk, an inscrutable Chinese working obediently for the British Secret Service.

Moreover, the cross-ethnic identification and hybridization associated with martial arts spectatorship is separated out and sanitized in *Enter the Dragon*: all of the cultural entities and identities that could be infected and intermixed through martial arts fantasy and practice become compartmentalised again into stock figures: the lead role of the film is split three ways, into the white ersatz Bond (John Saxon), the black inner city karateka (Jim Kelly) and the pure ‘good’ Chinese (Bruce Lee), all facing the entirely evil Fu Manchu character, ‘Han’. So, in this highest pinnacle of the kung fu craze of the early 70s can be seen a depoliticization, cooptation, domestication or hegemonization.¹ This was completed, argues Bill Brown, in the song ‘Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting’, which rendered twee, eccentric and comic certain counterhegemonic cultural impulses via the cultural cross-dressing of the

performer and the quirkiness of the musical Chinese clichés incorporated into the disco beat.

Dragon Entering

So, if now the Dragon had entered, if East Asia had arrived, right into the heart of Western – indeed, global – popular consciousness and popular culture, it had arrived as a simulacrum, a precession of simulacra, a spectacle of stereotypes. The explosion of popular cross-cultural or east-west popular cultural communication of the 1970s was initiated, initialized, orientated and organized by a kind of circuit exchange of simulacra.²

If this is a kind of cultural communication, it has annoyed and even enraged all manner of scholars and purists. This is because it is at best a kind of ‘double communication’ rather than two-way communication. ‘Two-way communication’ implies the face-to-face co-presence of two intending consciousnesses. But what we see in cultural communication like this is a process without a subject (without, at least, a simple, single, unitary or unified subject).

According to theorists like Fredric Jameson and Rey Chow, the ‘face-to-face’ of cross-cultural communication always involves the play of the cross-border distribution and circulation of stereotypes and the trade in tokens; stereotypes and tokens that overdetermine in advance the structure of cross-cultural encounters.³ Or, as Bill Brown has more generously formulated this: all of the interethnic identification and cultural mobility associated with early western martial arts culture was premised and predicated on the collaboration of the Hong Kong and Hollywood film industries.⁴

Go West

But, this collaboration can hardly be said to be one of equal partners – at least not *culturally*, not *narratively*, not *discursively* (in terms of the *kinds* of texts produced), regardless of the financial figures involved.⁵ This is why many have argued that, cinematically, at least, the circuit of communication in which martial arts have circulated has been a one way appropriative street; or rather, a 2nd class return ticket. For, what has overwhelmingly happened is that the Western man goes or has been East, and brings back or has brought back or masters or will master something or someone from the East to the west. This is often kung fu or karate; or a woman; or both. One need only think of the cinematic legacies of Chuck Norris, Steven Seagal, or Jean Claude Van Damme, or the appropriative logic of texts like *Gold Finger*, *Dr No*, *Bullet Proof Monk*, *The Last Samurai*, *The Matrix*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or *Kill Bill* to see this. Similarly, male Asian actors all seem to share a similar narrative: massively successful in different regional film industries (especially Hong Kong) but consistently unable to play anything other than chop-socky characters in Western (especially Hollywood) productions.

The UK Jet Li film *Unleashed* [aka *Danny the Dog*] provides a good allegory of this: Li's character is removed from all culture, history, personality or personhood, kept in a dog collar and unleashed only to fight. When finally definitively unleashed from the leash, we learn that all Jet Li's Danny (the Dog) desires is *culture*.

Accordingly, a lot has been said about the racism and cultural biases of the Hollywood film industry. Of course, just as much could be said about the racism and

biases of the Hong Kong film industry. The stereotypes of westerners in Hong Kong films are just as preposterous as their more famous orientalist counterparts: the very recent film, *Bruce Lee, My Brother* (also known as *Young Bruce Lee*), for example, is a sentimental fabrication about Bruce Lee's Hong Kong childhood, which along the way also waxes surprisingly nostalgic about Hong Kong's British colonial past, but which, in doing so, could not seem to muster a single British actor to play any of the many British characters: at first the white actors seem to *try* to affect British accents, but by the end of the film, that brief has been entirely forgotten, and Australian and Mid-Atlantic accents abound.

But this is not my interest here. One should not expect too much from Hollywood, or Hong Kong; or indeed Bollywood or Beijing. What strikes me as more significant is the question of the routes or directions of the transfers, travels and communications.

Martial arts films have long fed on the themes of diasporic displacement, of tradition and institution, of inheritance and communication, of passing on and passing over. The master dies or is assassinated; the number one son travels to a new town or a new land; the Westerner visits the East and takes away a new mastery of something very old. They feed on questions of transmission: who can be allowed to inherit the secrets – male or female, Asian or white? In which direction should things go?

Bruce Lee's third Hong Kong film, *Way of the Dragon*, or *Return of the Dragon*, in Chinese is called *Meng Long Guo Jiang* (猛龍過江), which can be translated literally as something like 'The Fierce Dragon Crosses The River', which refers to travel and migration, and to the diasporic Chinese crossing over to Europe. In this film, Lee

travels from Hong Kong to Rome and defeats the mafia – who are represented in terms of perhaps the strangest, most multicultural mafia gang ever depicted on screen, consisting not of slick Italian gangsters, but rather of shabby whites and blacks, and an ultra-camp Chinese translator. This mismatching mishmash or misperception of the mafia is entirely appropriate in a film which I would (and doubtless will) argue (at some other time) is best regarded as precisely the kind of postcolonial ethnography that Rey Chow argues for in her magnificent essay ‘Film as Ethnography; or: Translating Between Cultures in a Postcolonial World’. But that’s for another day. For now, let me merely note that when the Europeans can’t beat Lee’s Chinese local boy (aka ‘native’), they call in ‘America’s best’ – the martial artist Colt, played by Chuck Norris. Lee defeats the American karateka, restores the sovereignty of the Chinese restaurant business that he has come to save in the first place and then, when the hurly-burly’s done, jets off back to Hong Kong. Thus, the film seems to say: there’s nothing for the Chinese in the West other than chop-socky and chop-suey.

Lee’s return trip in this film is essentially what has happened to all subsequent Asian male action leads: they go to America, beat the best of the West in action flicks, but then find nothing else for themselves, no other space, and have to return to Asia for anything like a different kind of cinematic role. Needless to say, Chuck Norris rose like a phoenix from Colt’s ashes and blazed the trail which whitened and Americanized martial arts, so that, ultimately, Western martial arts films need less and less to make what was earlier their obligatory reference to an Asian origin. Many still do, but the gesture ‘East’ is little more than window-dressing: in *The Matrix* Neo fights Morpheus thanks to kung fu software in a vaguely oriental room; Bruce Wayne

in *Batman Begins* is trained by ninjas but kills them all (because they are devious and fiendish) – and with a martial art that was actually entirely invented by US stuntmen. Rex in *Napoleon Dynamite* invents ‘Rex Kwon Do’ over two seasons of fighting in the octagon. While Jason Bourne in *The Bourne Identity* doesn’t even remember how or where he learned to fight.

Martial arts cinema aficionados will tell you that Bourne’s fighting style is derived from Filipino kali or eskrima plus Jeet Kune Do, as taught by the film’s fight choreographer, Jeff Imada, as taught to him by Bruce Lee’s student Dan Inosanto. But, really – at least in one psychoanalytic register of ‘really’ – they’ve all learnt their martial arts like Bradley Cooper in *Limitless* – who learns his fighting from his memories of Bruce Lee films – or, indeed– like Brad Pitt’s Tyler Durden in *Fight Club*: in the manner of a schizophrenic hallucinatory projection based on a spectator’s fantasy of Bruce Lee.

And East

Indeed, despite all reroutings, displacements, transports, transformations and deracinations, what remains clear is this: spectres of Bruce Lee structure this discourse. But is this just an Americanized discourse – a conversation or discourse entirely ‘internal’ to the West?

I don’t think so. This is because, especially following the 1997 handover of Hong Kong to China, figures, spectres, stand-ins, tokens and representatives of Bruce Lee have re-entered Hong Kong and Chinese films – and more than films – in very prominent ways.

There has been a surprising upsurge of interest in Bruce Lee and Bruce Lee related themes in both Hong Kong and China. Before the Beijing Olympics, Chinese national television initiated a subsequently very long running TV series on the life and adventures of Bruce Lee. In Hong Kong over the last few years, a veritable rash of Bruce Lee related films has broken out. In most of these Bruce Lee returns at one remove, but present, in displacement: in films about his wing chun kung fu teacher, Ip Man, or about Chen Zhen, the character he played in *Fist of Fury*, as well as films about his young life in Hong Kong. All of this is fictionalized, mythologized.

The *Ip Man* films star Donnie Yen. Other films about Ip Man are reputed to be in production. In Yen's *Ip Man* films, Ip Man is depicted as a flawless Chinese nationalist hero, one of the folk of Southern China who had to flee to Hong Kong to escape the Japanese. Throughout these films, Ip Man is regularly conflated not only with Bruce Lee but also with the character that Lee popularized in the ultra-nationalist film *Jing Wu Men / Fist of Fury*, with his ultra-nationalist character Chen Zhen. At around the same time, Donnie Yen also played Chen Zhen in the film *Legend of the Fist: The Return of Chen Zhen*. In this, Chen Zhen is conflated not only with Bruce Lee, but also with Jet Li, and – bizarrely – also with the character ‘Kato’ that Bruce Lee played in the American TV show *The Green Hornet*.

(Of course, like Chen Zhen, the real, historical person, Ip Man, would be *entirely* unknown outside of Hong Kong, as would the martial art he taught (wing chun / yong chun). Both Ip Man and Wing Chun are now world famous *solely* because the most famous student was Bruce Lee.

In other words, what shines through in this recent rash of films is the way that Bruce Lee is silently structuring more than just some films, but actually an ongoing discourse (at least a filmic discourse) about the relationship of Hong Kong to China and China to Hong Kong and on to the world. Chen Zhen returns from Europe to Shanghai to fight crime in the mask Lee wore when playing Kato in *The Green Hornet*. He returns to the famous Japanese Dojo to beat the son of the master he killed first time around in both Bruce Lee's *Fist of Fury* and Jet Li's *Fist of Legend*. Bruce Lee's and Jet Li's and Donnie Yen's Chen Zhens, plus Yen's Ip Man all beat Japanese karateka in very similar dojos viewed through very similar camera angles.

In all of these films, the key journeys and transports are between Hong Kong and Shanghai. In addition: all are organized by the idea of escaping or combating *Japanese* aggressors. In fact, the links between Hong Kong and the mainland are prominent in them all, and closely coupled with Japanese as enemy. As such, the figure of Japan is functioning now as a 'screen memory', and accordingly therefore as a stand-in, a scapegoat. But for what? The answer becomes clear when one knows that the real historical figure, Ip Man, moved to Hong Kong not to escape from the Japanese but to escape the emergence of the Communist regime in China.

Unsurprisingly, however, this entity – Communist China – is entirely absent from all of these films. In its place is the one-stop-shop bogeyman of Japan.

The complex and contradictory historical relationship between Communist China and capitalist Hong Kong is the proverbial elephant in the room that these films –

which are ultimately all about reinventing the relationship between Hong Kong and China – cannot look at or speak about.

Bringing it all back home

So, even though Bruce Lee is regarded by Hong Kongers as about as much of a Hong Konger as Hong Kong Disneyland, Bruce Lee is nevertheless structuring or suturing a renegotiated and re-grafted cultural discursive relationship between Hong Kong and China. Indeed, Bruce Lee has arguably always been the figure of the graft, the connection, the common link, the common identification, the thing shared in common. In some martial arts films – east or west – it is true that he may not always be there. But in martial arts *culture*, or the points at which martial arts connect to *culture* or connect *cultures*, he is almost always there.

Even in the recent US and Chinese co-production of the rewritten remake of the 1984 film *The Karate Kid*, Lee is *written into* a film that he was entirely absent from in its first incarnation. In the 1984 *Karate Kid*, the focus is entirely American. It takes place in America. The martial art is Okinawan goju-ryu karatedo – karatedo being the martial art that America first experienced by virtue of its post 2nd World War occupation of Japan and Okinawa. And the motive force for the action of the story in the first place is the fact that Danny Laruso has had to move from the East coast of America to California, because of his mother's work.⁶

However, by the time of the 2010 remake of *The Karate Kid*, there are some significant changes. The eponymous 'kid', Dre Parker, now has to leave the USA itself, because of his mother's job. This is quite a new theme. More pointedly, they have to

move from Detroit (America's industrial disaster area) to Beijing. Immanently significantly, Dre is black. However, interestingly, ethnicity largely vanishes in the remade film. Dre Parker may be black, but he is nevertheless immediately and unproblematically recognised and welcomed in Beijing as 'one of us' by an almost albino-blond white boy. Whether this bespeaks the footnote to the American dream of an American identity that is colour-blind, or whether it testifies to the pragmatic contingencies of all relationship-, community- and identity-formation is something that can be debated. But what the black and the white share here is place of birth, of course; and language; but also reason for being there: *economic migration*.

After Dre's initial cultural disorientation and alienation, the film ditches the potentially knotty theme of cultural difference. Everyone speaks English in Beijing. Everyone is kind – except the schoolboy bullies. No one, but no one, is racist. Beijing is beautiful, welcoming. Dre and his sifu, played by Jackie Chan, go to Guilin, China's own beloved tourist destination and HSBC advert location – where they have even built some kind of bizarre open-access faux-ancient Taoist monastery at the top of some kind of crypto-Wu-tang Mountain.

In other words, if in 1973 the film title *Enter the Dragon* seemed to be the announcement of the arrival of the East in the West, and reciprocally therefore the entrance of the West into the East – the commodification and marketization of the East by the west, the popular cultural appropriation of the Eastern in the West – by 2010 the words 'enter the dragon' seem to be more of an *encouragement* – as in, 'come on in, enter the dragon, it's great'.

This is unsurprising, perhaps, given the involvement of the China Film Group Corporation in the making of *The Karate Kid*, and the well-known concern of the Chinese state nowadays for its public image.

But still, it is significant that, as if concerned for his protégé's own public image, at the end of *The Karate Kid*, whilst preparing for the final showdown at a kung fu competition, Dre Parker's sifu, Mr Han (Jackie Chan), presents him with a fine white jacket. Dre looks awed: 'just like the one Bruce Lee wore', he says. Indeed, it is obviously evocative of the white jacket Bruce Lee wears as the nationalist Chen Zhen at his master's funeral in *Jing Wu Men / Fist of Fury*. But here there is no such nationalism, no such fury. Rather, the film proposes a colour-blind transnational interethnic Beijing, with no racism, no ethnocentrism, and only the subjective encounters of equals.

The silliness of this new Beijing-Hollywood vision of the world (or should that be Beiwood or Hollyjing vision of the world?) perhaps goes without saying. But perhaps it has one saving grace. For, in this film, Mr Han, played by Jackie Chan, has finally been allowed to act, has finally been allowed a character; finally allowed a subjecthood, a humanizing back-story, a depth and complexity.

If in the end, this is very little, it is certainly not nothing. For perhaps this silly little remake of a film, which is obdurately colour-blind and which achieves little more than is new other than allowing the erstwhile slapstick martial arts institution Jackie Chan to play a mature character in a Hollywood production nevertheless bespeaks or registers the shifting geopolitical relations involved in cultural hegemony, cultural

identity and cultural production. Despite its limitations, the film is perhaps also communicating a new message: no longer a message about decentring or provincializing Europe (*Europe* is neither here nor there); now a message about decentring and provincializing *America*.⁷

¹ It was certainly its existentialization. By 1975, as popular history records it, everybody was kung fu fighting. Certainly more and more movie stars were, more and more children were play-acting kung fu moves in the playground, and more and more westerners were becoming more interested in more aspects of Chinese and East Asian culture and life and practices.

² The phrase 'Enter the Dragon' suggests *active arrival*: the active entrance of an actor or agent onto a certain stage: It is the Dragon that enters somewhere else, something else, or someone else. But the phrase also has its other equally possible reading: as an injunction or imperative: a command: 'Enter the Dragon!' As in 'See that Dragon there? Enter it!' And there certainly is a two-way movement, a double-communication, between East and West, West and East.

³ Using Lacan's terms, Laclau and Mouffe spoke of *points de capiton*, which they translated as 'quilting points', and theorized as those nodal points of discourse which enable predication and signification, no matter how false or constructed they may turn out to be. Hence I am saying 'double communication' rather than two-way communication; for this is a communication which may or may not be two-way but in which there is always a doubleness or even duplicity.

⁴ The film *Enter the Dragon* was a two-way co-production, funded by both Hong Kong and Hollywood production companies. As we have already seen, it was both a kind of communication and a complete fabulation or simulation. Bruce Lee's own career trajectory involved literal, metaphorical and physical two-way relays between Hong Kong and the US: his minor success in the mid-60s playing a superhero's sidekick called Kato in the US TV show *The Green Hornet* precipitated his massive popularity in Hong Kong; to which he returned to make three films that became such massive hits all across Asia that Hollywood finally sat up and took notice and dipped their toes into the waters of the possibility of non-white action hero film stars. They did so tentatively, by dividing the lead role in *Enter the Dragon* three ways: between the black Jim Kelly, the white John Saxon, and the yellow Bruce Lee. So, *Enter the Dragon* signalled not only the entrance of Asian faces on Hollywood screens (Bruce Lee was the first Asian male lead in what the first posters for *Enter the Dragon* proudly declared to be 'the first Hollywood produced martial arts spectacular') but also the entrance of Hollywood products into Asian markets. *Enter the Dragon* is a two way street of cultural translation. On the one hand, the kung fu craze that flared up in the West in 1973 offered all manner of modes of interethnic identification, cultural encounters, relays, communications and all kinds of cross-cultural mobility. But, on the other hand, as Bill Brown has noted, all of this interethnic identification and cultural mobility was premised and predicated on the collaboration of the Hong Kong and Hollywood film industries.

⁵ These films may easily seem, in Chow's words, to be "equally caught up in the generalized atmosphere of unequal power distribution and [to be] actively (re)producing *within themselves* the structures of domination and hierarchy that are as typical of non-European cultural histories as they are of European imperialism" (1995: 194).

⁶ Even 1984's entirely US-based production, *The Karate Kid*, involved a mode of displacement and diasporic scattering that was east to west: the Italian American protagonist, the teenage Danny Laruso, is displaced because of his mother's work and moves from the east to the West Coast of America, where he meets the Okinawan karateka Mr Miyagi, who teaches him what is called 'Miyago-do karate' in the film but what is essentially goju-ryu karate (a style that was indeed reputedly founded by a Miyagi).

⁷ As simple, facile, saccharine and utopian as it may often seem, I agree entirely with Rey Chow, who has argued that 'There are multiple reasons why a consideration of mass culture is crucial to cultural translation'. To her mind, 'the predominant one' is to examine 'that asymmetry of power relations between the "first" and the "third" worlds'. However, that's not all: as she continues, 'Critiquing the great disparity between Europe and the rest of the world means not simply a deconstruction of Europe as origin or simply a restitution of the origin that is Europe's others but a thorough dismantling of *both* the notion of origin and the notion of alterity as we know them today' (193-4). To my mind, the entrance and the re-entrance of the dragon has long been active in this complex communication and translation process.