

# BOOK REVIEW

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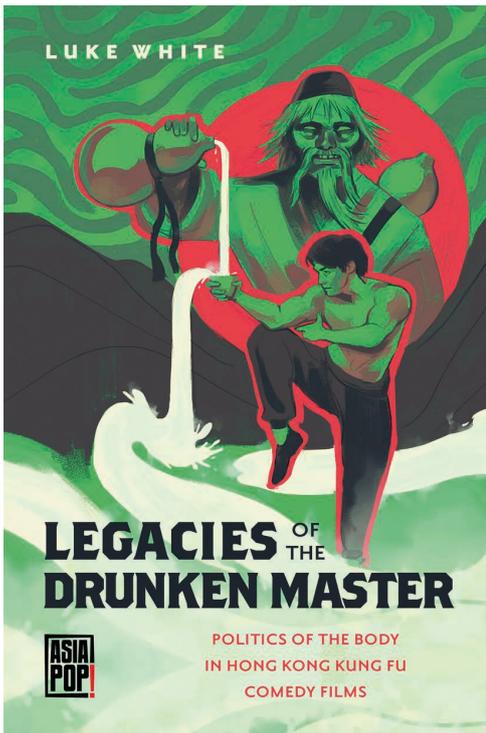
## Legacies of the Drunken Master: Politics of the Body in Hong Kong Kung Fu Comedy Films

Luke White

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## REVIEWER

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## INTRODUCTION

Early in his magisterial work of ordinary language philosophy, *The Claim of Reason*, Stanley Cavell postulated that 'a measure of the quality of a new text is the quality of the texts it arouses' [Cavell 1979: 5]. This can be understood in two ways, or directions. On the one hand, in the sense of 'arouse' as 'to awaken', this can be understood in the direction of the past, as the historical texts that a new text brings renewed attention to or reconsiders/reconfigures. On the other hand, in the sense of 'arouse' as 'to stir to action', this can be understood in the direction of the future, as the subsequent texts that a new text can in time be said to have inspired. However and in whatever direction(s) one understands Cavell's postulation, it is readily apparent that Luke White's new text *Legacies of the Drunken Master: Politics of the Body in Hong Kong Kung Fu Comedy Films* is of a very high quality, for it both insightfully reconsiders and reconfigures countless historical texts, from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and Walter Benjamin in the broad sphere of cultural theory to the work of David Bordwell and Leon Hunt in the narrow sphere of martial arts cinema studies, while also providing nuanced, insightful, and inspiring original arguments relating to cultural theory and film history that will certainly invigorate scholars working in the areas of cultural studies, film studies, and martial arts studies.

White begins his text by staking out his scholarly territory. With a nod to Bakhtin's observation that 'laughter and its forms represent [...] the least scrutinized sphere of the people's creation' [Bakhtin 1965/1984: 4, quoted in White 2020: 1], White laments the fact that, despite the growing presence of martial arts cinema in recent scholarship in and between cultural studies, film studies, and martial arts studies, no book-length academic explorations of kung fu comedy exist in the English language. This in spite of the fact that kung fu comedy is:

a historically significant phenomenon [...] the significance of [which] is only amplified when we remember that the genre's lovable everyman and global megastar, Jackie Chan, for many years regularly topped box offices not only in Hong Kong but across Asia before making the jump in the 1990s to a level of Hollywood superstardom not even achieved by Bruce Lee. [White 2020: 3]

To be clear, White's purpose in *Legacies of the Drunken Master* is not to investigate the reasons for the scholarly neglect of kung fu comedies. Rather, White's purpose is 'to redress the critical neglect of the kung fu comedy' by 'offering a detailed exploration of its aesthetic properties and pleasures' on the one hand and 'contextualizing it and making sense of its social and political significance' on the other. It is his 'fundamental gambit [...] to take the kung fu comedy seriously' [White 2020: 5].

Having thus staked out his investigative terrain, White next clarifies his methodological orientation. White states in no uncertain terms that his text 'is unashamedly "theoretical"', by which he means to distinguish his overtly theoretical approach to kung fu comedy from the 'Post-Theory' orientation of pioneering martial arts cinema scholar David Bordwell, who, along with Noël Carroll, was instrumental in moving film studies away from what they referred to alternatively (and pejoratively) as 'Grand Theory', 'Screen Theory', or, as Bordwell himself preferred, 'SLAB Theory' [cf. Bordwell and Carroll 1996; see also Bordwell 1989]. For their part, Bordwell and Carroll encouraged scholars to eschew the (politically-minded) dogmatism of earlier eras of film studies, in which capital-T 'Theory' reigned supreme, and push the discipline in the direction of more modest and diverse investigations of cinematic phenomena (like the kung fu comedy) [cf. Barrowman 2014a]. In this way, White's investigation is actually of a piece with the Post-Theory initiative. However, at the end of the day, White is a cultural studies scholar, and so his work is indebted to the dominant disciplinary strain of postmodern (neo-)Marxism [cf. Barrowman 2019a]. To his credit, though, this methodological orientation did not hinder White in his investigation. On the contrary, White managed to produce an assiduously researched, commendably nuanced, and extraordinarily rich investigation of martial arts cinema history generally and the kung fu comedy specifically.

Structurally, White's layout in this text is rather idiosyncratic. As opposed to dividing up his chapters chronologically, or organizing them according to specific stars or directors, White's investigation proceeds with reference to a handful of organizing concepts: Carnival, Utopia, Violence, Hysteria, Masculinity, and Legacies. In deference to the structure of White's text, this review will also be organized according to these concepts.

## CARNIVAL

After his introduction, White moves immediately to the notion of the 'carnival' as theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin. Having acknowledged the seemingly inappropriate desire to apply 'an essentially European canon [...] to cultural production from a postcolonial, East Asian context', White works in this initial chapter to demonstrate the relevance of Bakhtin's notion of the carnival, and specifically of the 'grotesque body', to the kung fu comedy in a way that 'ensure[s] that the Hong Kong context does not get "emptied out" [...] and that "theory" does not get hypostatized or universalized' [White 2020: 19]. And it must be stated that he executes this theoretical two-step superbly. Not only is White's articulation of the Bakhtinian notions of the carnival and the grotesque body fascinating in and of itself, he brings it provocatively to bear on a discussion of the differences between the 'perfected' body of Bruce Lee, which is on display in such iconic 'heroic' kung fu films as *Fist of Fury* (1972), and the 'imperfect' bodies of the kung fu comedy's parade of 'cripples, drunks, and geriatrics' [White 2020: 49]. In so doing, he foregrounds the extent to which the kung fu comedy is 'antiauthoritarian' and to which it 'resists [...] traditional roles and norms' from typical aesthetic representations of masculinity to 'the conventionality of "Confucian" culture' [White 2020: 51]. Right off the bat, White demonstrates the ease with which he can move from cataloguing the generic constituents of kung fu comedy to theorizing the carnival, the grotesque, and the antiauthoritarian in philosophical and political terms. That is, in this chapter White demonstrates the harmonious balance that he managed to strike between cinephile and theorist, fan and scholar.

On the whole, the purpose of this chapter is to introduce the archetype of the Drunken Master in the specific cinematic context of late 1970s Hong Kong cinema. The Drunken Master, for White, 'most clearly epitomizes' the historical shift in Hong Kong martial arts film production toward comedy [White 2020: 40]. But White does not merely want to historically situate the Drunken Master. This is merely a prelude to an insightful theoretical articulation of what the Drunken Master stands for, or, more accurately, stands against.

While the *tiyu* (physical culture) movement of the twentieth century sought to use martial arts to promote youthfulness, fitness, health, and hygiene as the path to an empowered Chinese modernity, the 'Drunken Master' – even in his very name – seems to transgress such an equation. Aged, alcoholic, and slovenly, as a wandering beggar the iconic figure of the drunken master lives outside both the respectable Confucian family and the world of work, defying both the productivity of the modern body and its reproductive powers. Unwashed and dressed in filthy, stinking rags, he refuses [modern] disciplinary forces [...] [while] the films seem to refuse the processes of political subjectification that 'kung fu' might thus have offered.

[White 2020: 40]

This is where White executes his impressive argumentative turn. Though kung fu comedies *seem* to be 'merely' comedic, silly, trivial, etc., it is White's contention that the fact that films like *Snake in the Eagle's Shadow* (1978) and *Drunken Master* (1978) are different in tone and orientation than, say, *The Assassin* (1967) or *Fist of Fury* is (importantly) *not* to say that the former films are apolitical or irrelevant to questions of politics. White's gambit, then, is not merely to take kung fu comedies *seriously*, but to take them *politically*. And his arguments to this effect, including in this chapter in which he argues for understanding kung fu comedies as promulgating a politics of 'indiscipline' [cf. White 2020: 41-58], are intelligently and persuasively formulated.

However, there are a few claims in this chapter that are a bit eyebrow-raising. For instance, I wonder if White does not go too far down the theory rabbit hole in discussing Robert Stam's notion of the grotesque body as resisting the alleged 'body fascism' that such 'idealized physiques' as Bruce Lee's 'might entail' [White 2020: 49]. For one thing, anything 'might entail' anything else. Why should we, if we should, repudiate or distance ourselves from Lee's emphasis on physical fitness, or, in White's own terms, 'normalizable corporeal perfection' [White 2020: 49]? For another thing, the term 'fascism' is thrown around much too frequently and casually these days, and White never makes clear to what extent anything even remotely connected to Lee could be said to be in support of anything even remotely fascist, especially considering the frequency with which Lee's persona and films have been discussed in contexts of disenfranchisement, resistance, protest, etc., as opposed to totalitarianism, superiority, subjection, etc. [cf. White 2020: 49].

I also wonder if White does not protest too much with respect to the alleged distance that separates Bruce Lee as a 'heroic' kung fu star and Jackie Chan as a 'comedic' kung fu star. It seems to me that it is less a question of either heroic or comedic and more a question of the ratio of heroism to comedy in a given film or characterization. At one point, White draws attention to the alleged 'humorlessness' of *Fist of Fury* to mark out a contrast between the heroic kung fu films of the early 1970s and the comedic kung fu films of the late 1970s [White 2020: 34]. But can one really describe as 'humorless' a film in which Lee pays tribute to Jerry Lewis and does a comedic turn as a goofy telephone repairman? In point of fact, every single one of Lee's films from *The Big Boss* (1971) through *Enter the Dragon* (1973) has at least one or two scenes, or one or two characters, meant to be comedic and which/who provide comedic relief. In *The Way of the Dragon* (1972) in particular, in the famed double nunchaku fight scene in the restaurant back alley, Lee integrates intense combat and silly comedy seamlessly in a manner that anticipates the likes of Chan and Sammo Hung. Is there perhaps even more benefit – historically and theoretically – to exploring the extent to which Lee and Chan are *similar* rather than positioning them at opposite poles? This is, of course, an open question – to White and to any other scholars interested in this topic – and one which serves to indicate the potential texts that White's text could arouse in future scholarly efforts.

## UTOPIA

Having established the historical and theoretical ‘place’ of the Drunken Master, and having initiated his political argument vis-à-vis the claim that kung fu comedies are not apolitical but merely politically orient themselves differently than their martial arts cinema predecessors, in the second chapter White moves on to a consideration of the ‘utopian’ potential of the genre. This is where White introduces the work of Walter Benjamin. Benjamin, of course, famously wrote about silent Hollywood slapstick comedy as well as Disney cartoons. For White, this material provides an inroad to a theoretical discussion of the utopian potential of kung fu comedy insofar as the latter can be conceived as inheriting the legacies of the former. In the course of a stirring reading of *Snake in the Eagle’s Shadow* as offering in Jackie Chan’s youthful protagonist a Mickey Mouse figure who ‘subverts the “hierarchy” of beings, plunging into the inanimate and mechanical (in [the] alliance with and imitation of machinery), into the animal (in becoming snake, cat, monkey, or the like), and also into the super or post-human in [his] assumption of new powers (in becoming dragon – or even drunken god)’ [White 2020: 69], White persuasively illuminates the degree to which Chan duplicates the comedic efforts of Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times* (1936) to ‘tarry with the modern’, as it were.

This opens out onto White’s broader interest in a specifically Benjaminian notion of utopia. If, in White’s sagacious elucidation of Benjamin’s work, Mickey Mouse ‘emphasize[s] the utopian powers [...] of transformation [e.g. becoming snake]’ and the ‘rejection of the “prison-world” of everyday experience’ [White 2020: 70], then Jackie Chan – and, beyond Chan as an individual star, the protagonists of kung fu comedies – can be similarly conceived. Indeed, it is on this point that White manages to connect his previous exploration of the carnival and the grotesque to his current exploration of utopia.

The kung fu comedy becomes legible [by virtue of White’s Bakhtinian and Benjaminian understanding of it] as an insubordinate reaction to experiences of the alienation of the body [...] and as offering a redemptive image in which the new powers of the [modern] world are incorporated (or in Benjamin’s terminology, ‘innervated’) into the body itself [...] These powers, within the cinematic imagination at its most emancipatory, open up a critical vision that refuses to accept the world as it is [...] envisioning the possibility of transformation not only of the body and the self, but also of the whole world of things within which we live. Such a cinematic dream-world (opposed to the ‘prison-house’ of the everyday) begins to resemble the utopia of carnival in which all things are involved in constant transformation.  
[White 2020: 73]

Beginning with a reading of *Snake in the Eagle’s Shadow*, White concludes this chapter with another brilliant reading of a film, this time of Chan’s *Project A* (1983). In the course of his analysis, White notes the slapstick-inspired manner in which Chan ‘builds [his] humor out of the transformation of objects from their mundane uses to new and surprising ends, based not on convention, but on the morphology of the object itself’ [White 2020: 75; see also Barrowman 2019b], ultimately concluding that in *Project A*, even though it ‘certainly doesn’t offer the kind of open anticolonial and ethnonationalist revolt’ as seen in something like Lee’s *Fist of Fury*, ‘Chan as Dragon Ma nonetheless introduces an element of anarchy into colonial spaces through his physical traversal of them and his refunctioning of their logic’ [White 2020: 77]. In the end, White argues that *Project A* enacts ‘a kind of “kung fu revenge” upon ‘space[s] of class and colonial privilege’ [White 2020: 80].

Of course, the very notion of utopia has quite a bit of historical and theoretical baggage, none of which White picks through at any point in this chapter. Though his film-specific analyses are rich and insightful, the larger questions of the theoretical and practical validity of utopianism – whether in a specifically Marxist context

or in any other political context – were left unexamined. This leaves quite a large hole in White's discussion, as he frequently invokes Marxist ideas and arguments as if self-evidently true, on the one hand, and as if oblivious to the fact that Marx himself was opposed to utopianism, on the other [cf. Sciabarra 1995, 2000; see also Sciabarra, Bissell, and Younkins 2019]. But this is more a question of politics than of cinema, and it is to White's credit that very rarely does he push political ideas or arguments over or at the expense of articulating the discernible content of the films under consideration.

## VIOLENCE

Avid readers of Benjamin will not be surprised to see that, after introducing Benjamin and spending time in the second chapter exploring his thoughts on Mickey Mouse, White moves on to a consideration of violence in the context of Benjamin's dialogues with cultural critics Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. This makes for a particularly difficult chapter for White, seeing as he is tasked with exploring 'a multifaceted phenomenon', one which is 'inherently an ambiguous, overdetermined phenomenon [...] with a range of very different historical manifestations both on screen and off, each with very different meanings or ramifications' [White 2020: 83]. Martial arts studies scholars will certainly find this chapter fascinating, as people like Sixt Wetzler [2018] and Benjamin Judkins [2018, 2019] have been encouraging more detailed considerations of violence and of the violent practices of martial arts, while others like Janet O'Shea [2018] and Alex Channon [2020; see also Barrowman and Channon 2018 and Bowman 2020: 214-239] have sought to move away from or challenge conventional understandings of martial arts as violent. Though I personally reject White's bald assertion that 'violence is, after all, always a matter of the irrational' [White 2020: 83], and though I also reject his characterization of capitalism as 'exploitation' and especially as 'violent exploitation' [White 2020: 84], I nevertheless find his consideration of cinematic violence in kung fu comedies interesting and astute.

One of White's contentions is that the violent comedy of kung fu comedies, much like the violent comedy of Hollywood slapstick, is capable of 'inculcating a capacity for feeling that is at once corporeal and also emotional' [White 2020: 85; see also Clayton 2007]. That is to say, the violence in kung fu comedies is not (necessarily or inherently) detrimental or deleterious; rather, it is (or can potentially be) beneficial, at least to the extent that kung fu comedies are capable of 'channeling destructive urges into the realm of representation [and thereby] ameliorat[ing] their expression in life' [White 2020: 88]. While this is a familiar argument regarding media violence (be it film violence, or TV violence, or video game violence, etc.), White adds color to this theoretical picture by considering the importance in kung fu comedies, and especially to the star persona of Jackie Chan, not of violence *administered* but violence *suffered*.

With reference to Chan's celebrated practice not only of executing incredibly daring stunts but of showcasing the physical pain endured in order to execute those stunts, White considers the significance of these visual displays of violence suffered by kung fu comedy protagonists. White acknowledges the possibility of reading this aspect of kung fu comedies as capitulation to capitalism. Leaving aside the implicit premises that capitalism is bad and therefore capitulation to it is bad, which are by no means self-evidently true, such a reading would contend that the fetishization of suffering in the Chan star persona works to (a) pacify viewers in a manner analogous to Adorno and Horkheimer's assessment of Donald Duck ('Donald Duck in the cartoons [...] get[s] [his] thrashing so that the audience can learn to take their own beating' [Adorno and Horkheimer 1947/2002: 110]) and even to (b) valorize this ability to take a beating in a manner analogous to Mark Neocleous' critique of the neoliberal notion of resilience (inasmuch as it presents, in his estimation, a false sense of virtue which masks the fact that the 'traumas' of capitalism are being naturalized [Neocleous

2013]). In contrast to such a reading, White encourages a perspectival shift whereby resilience is transformed from being a kind of neoliberal gaslighting to being a (specifically Chinese) virtue vis-à-vis the martial notion of 'eating bitter'. After all, as White soberly avers, resilience is a prerequisite to resistance or revolt [White 2020: 94].

For the purpose of this argument, White usefully takes his accompanying film analysis, specifically of Chan's physical bravery and corporeal suffering, beyond Leon Hunt's well-known discussion of 'corporeal authenticity' [cf. Hunt 2003: 39-41]. However, in going beyond Hunt's coordinates vis-à-vis realism and representation, White creates problems of his own. For instance, White postulates that 'the kung fu comedy seemed to reverse the trend to increased "realism" and return to the deliberately theatrical elements of opera that the films of the early 1970s had eschewed' [White 2020: 97]. The problem here is that White does not make clear at the outset his sense of realism in the cinema, let alone realism in martial arts cinema. So, when he goes on to imply that notions of theater, dance, and music – to say nothing of the notion of the comedic – are by definition antithetical to realism, I am left wondering why and according to what definition(s). As I see it, kung fu comedies are capable of being just as realistic as, if not more realistic than, heroic kung fu films. Not only is it possible to 'translate' something dramatic into a comedic register without compromising or losing (any of the) realism – as in, for example, the way that, in his castle confrontation with Benny 'The Jet' Urquidez in *Wheels on Meals* (1984), Jackie Chan 'translates' the Jeet Kune Do 'lesson' of adaptability that Bruce Lee 'teaches' in his Colosseum confrontation with Chuck Norris in *The Way of the Dragon* [cf. Bowman 2010: 76-77 and Barrowman 2012] – it is also possible to understand manifestly comedic content, such as the frequency with which Chan exhibits through facial expressions or verbal cries his pain at falling down or getting punched or kicked, precisely as markers of realism [cf. Barrowman 2014b; see also Bowman 2010: 73-84 and Wong 2017]. Of course, this is less a critique of White's argument vis-à-vis violence and more a demonstration of threads left dangling vis-à-vis film theory and criticism. But, in the spirit of texts arousing past and future texts, a more thorough consideration of realism generally and realism in kung fu comedies specifically would be most welcome, whether by White himself and/or by other scholars interested in these implications vis-à-vis martial arts practice and aesthetic representation.

## HYSTERIA

Indicating yet again the consistency and coherence of his investigation, White moves seamlessly from his consideration of violence, specifically in its comedic and *hysterical* modes, to a more elaborate consideration of the notion of hysteria itself. Situated within the psychoanalytic contexts of the writings of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, White moves from broad conceptions of kung fu comedies as hysterical in the sense that they provoke hysterical laughter and in the sense that the stars use their bodies in hysterical ways, to a technical conception of hysteria as naming the way that kung fu comedy characters relate to 'the conditions of bourgeois patriarchy' [White 2020: 110]. That is, if, as White contends, 'the social conformism of Hong Kong in the late 1970s seems to offer us something much more like the seemingly docile, silenced young women of the Victorian era than anything akin to Rey Chow's "protestant ethnic"', then 'if there is "resistance" here of some sort [...] it is likely to be on something of the same grounds as that of the hysteric rather than the radical activist' [White 2020: 112]. Continuing to develop his larger argument vis-à-vis kung fu comedies and politics, White offers another instance of the kung fu comedy not being apolitical but merely reorienting its political content. Here lacking overt displays of resistance analogous to Bruce Lee kicking the 'No Dogs and Chinese Allowed' sign in *Fist of Fury*, kung fu comedies embrace a more stereotypically 'feminine' mode of resistance understandable with reference to the notion of hysteria.

What defines hysteria most fundamentally is its corporeal dimension – what Freud termed the ‘bodily conversion’ of the symptom, where, with the silencing of the voice, it is left to the body to speak and to take on the burden of communicating the subject’s trauma [...]. The ‘exacerbated staging of the subject’ and ‘theatrical and operatic conversion’ of [hysterics] in fact describe well the exaggerated, formalized, and dance-like qualities of the martial arts performances of the kung fu comedy [...]. Indeed, although hysteria is more often associated in the popular imagination with ‘feminine’ weakness, fainting, or tears, what is striking in examining [Jean-Martin] Charcot’s attempts to create a photographic iconography of his patients’ enacted symptoms is the intense athleticism evident in many of his plates (of both men and women hysterics) and the resultant echoes between these images and those of the comedic martial arts body.  
[White 2020: 114]

From here, White proceeds to demonstrate the veracity of his contention that kung fu comedy protagonists, ‘in their very parallel to the ‘clownism’ of Charcot’s patients, become legible as displaced symptoms of a blocked political subjectivity’ [White 2020: 118], by virtue of a second pass over *Project A*. Initially, White adduced *Project A* in the context of a utopian analysis. Now, he adduces *Project A* in the context of a hysterical analysis. Personally, I find his hysterical analysis less convincing, if only because it is predicated on what I judge to be a misinterpretation of Chan’s star persona in one crucial respect. Assessing Chan’s career trajectory, White claims that Chan is synonymous with the role of ‘the dutiful cop – a faithful civil servant and upholder of (colonial) law and order’ [White 2020: 119], and he cites both the two *Project A* films and the *Police Story* films as examples of Chan playing this role.

With regard to the former films, White himself points out that ‘if, in *Project A*, I have argued, [Chan’s character] and his rather ramshackle cohort of coastguards accept and uphold the colonial order, it is only simultaneously to subvert it’ [White 2020: 119], while, with regard to the latter films, the same could be said, certainly of *Police Story* (1985), *Police Story 2* (1988), and *Supercop* (1992). Worse still, White goes on to claim that Chan not only continues this trend of playing the ‘dutiful’ and ‘obedient’ Asian character in his crossover Hollywood films but that this is evidence of his being subjected to or indulging in (White does not clarify which) ‘racial stereotypes’ [White 2020: 122]. I say ‘worse still’ because Chan is arguably at his *least* obedient and *most* subversive in *Rush Hour* (1998), in which he, an Asian character from Hong Kong coming to America, and American Detective James Carter (Chris Tucker), a black character who works for the Los Angeles Police Department but who is never given credence by his white superiors, spend nearly the entire film disregarding orders and protocol and subverting standard police procedure. To the extent that hysterics are hysterical because they do not have an outlet for their rebellious energies, I am not sure that White’s argument holds up inasmuch as I am not sure that Chan can really be considered a hysterical subject/character so defined.<sup>1</sup>

1 Not to harp on White too much, but, at the risk of being pedantic, I found this chapter to be the most questionable with respect to his film analyses and his film-historical claims. Going beyond the vicissitudes of Chan’s star persona, White also extends his consideration of Chan’s American films at one point to a discussion of the differences between Chan’s persona and the personas of ‘American heroes’ who ‘command the action by being the still point around which it turns, often filling the frame of a shot to emphasize their dominance over their world’. White adduces Arnold Schwarzenegger and Bruce Willis as examples of such American heroes and he contrasts them to Chan, who ‘more, again, like Buster Keaton or Mickey Mouse [...] is the acted-on and always out-of-control object of the forces around him, often framed as a small figure within a chaotic and dangerous environment’ [White 2020: 122]. To put it bluntly, I cannot imagine that anyone who has ever seen *Die Hard* (1988) would characterize Willis’ iconic performance as John McClane, one of the quintessential ‘wrong place, wrong time’ protagonists in contemporary cinema from one of the quintessential action-comedies in contemporary cinema, in a manner that even slightly differs from White’s characterization of Chan as the ‘acted-on’ and ‘out-of-control object of the forces around him’. Indeed, Willis is the closest to Chan of all the American action stars of the 1980s and 1990s in that his star persona is very much that of a comedic hero, as evidenced not only by *Die Hard* but also subsequent action-comedies such as *The Last Boy Scout* (1991) and *The Fifth Element* (1997).

## MASCULINITY

Nevertheless, White's discussion of hysteria ultimately serves as a springboard to a more focused discussion of gender. On this front, White's arguments are far more convincing and productive. Moving through an elaborate discussion of father figures in kung fu comedies, White builds in this chapter to a consideration of 'masculine anxiety and feminine excess' in *Drunken Master*, in the course of which he offers a series of insightful observations regarding the ostensibly 'masculine' 'essence' of martial arts practice versus their ostensibly 'feminine' ability to allow the weak to overcome the strong [cf. White 2020: 135] and the degree to which such 'excessive' representations of gender challenge conventional Western notions of masculinity and femininity.

But what is unique in White's analysis is that he goes beyond the familiar terrain of, for example, Bruce Lee's 'performance' of his 'extreme' masculinity in *The Way of the Dragon* to the uncharted territory of the kung fu comedy, wherein female characters frequently appear, such as Chan's character's aunt in *Drunken Master*, who are 'superior [fighters] to the male protagonist, throwing his virility into question'; indeed, White finds that in *Drunken Master* 'embracing femininity turns out to be an essential source of power' [White 2020: 137]. Aside from providing a profound reading of *Drunken Master* and Chan's character arc therein, White's insights regarding gender in Hong Kong kung fu comedies also resonate in considerations of the evolution of Arnold Schwarzenegger's Hollywood career from the 'hard' action star of such 1980s action classics as *Commando* (1985) and *Predator* (1987) to the 'soft' action star of such family-friendly 1990s films as *Kindergarten Cop* (1990) and *Jingle All the Way* (1996), to say nothing of the ability to extend White's consideration of female fighters in Hong Kong kung fu films (both dramatic and comedic) to considerations of contemporary female action stars between and beyond Hong Kong and Hollywood.

## LEGACIES

Fittingly enough, to speak of further resonances of the elements identified by White to be constitutive of the Hong Kong kung fu comedies of the 1970s and 1980s is to hint at the various legacies of the kung fu comedy. It is to this concept of legacy that White turns in the final chapter of his text. All throughout, of course, the concept of legacy subtends his many different discussions. But it is in this chapter that White foregrounds the concept and explores, beyond the specific coordinates of the 1970s and 1980s, the lasting impact that these kung fu comedies have had on Hong Kong film production. Not surprisingly, White begins with a consideration of the films of Stephen Chow, the Hong Kong film figure 'who most clearly and successfully carries the flag of Hong Kong martial-arts-themed comedy into the present' [White 2020: 152]. As White argues, Chow's films 'share much of the grotesquely corporeal carnival laughter' of the early kung fu comedies, 'as well as the absurdism that pervades so much Hong Kong humor – a continuation, perhaps, of a hysterical attack on the cultural and linguistic logic of a (post-)colonial order' [White 2020: 152-153]. Nevertheless, they involve 'something fundamentally different' [White 2020: 152], namely, a postmodern form of reference and citation whereby 'anything drawn from' the kung fu comedy tradition 'arrive[s] self-consciously in quotation marks', which, for White, makes it 'hard to know whether to situate Chow's films "within" the tradition of kung fu comedy or merely to locate the devices that he draws from them as witty – even perhaps satirical – intertextual evocations' [White 2020: 153].

Far more intriguing to White vis-à-vis the legacies of the *Drunken Master* are the films from the 1990s that 'returned to the motif of "drunken boxing" and to revising or imagining anew the myths' of the *Drunken Master* [White 2020: 158]. White closes his investigation proper with illuminating analyses of *King of Beggars*

(1992), *Heroes Among Heroes* (1993), and *Drunken Master II* (1994). What White finds so intriguing about these films is that, while they of course mark 'a continuation of the themes and motifs of the "drunken master" comedies of the late 1970s, and were made with many of the genre's instigators still at the creative helm', they more significantly mark an attempt to reinvent kung fu comedy 'for a new historical moment, both in terms of their incorporation of the newly dominant cinematic aesthetic of the period and also in terms of their response to historical circumstances' [White 2020: 158-159]. White's readings of these films against the cinematic backdrop of Tsui Hark's ascendancy and the eventual status of his *Once Upon a Time in China* (1991) on the one hand and against the cultural backdrop of the 1997 handover on the other are exemplary of his skill, on display chapter after chapter, page after page, in moving between large-scale historical, cultural, and theoretical discussions and small-scale, detailed film analyses.

## CONCLUSION

In the end, the takeaway having read *Legacies of the Drunken Master* is that it will surely be a go-to text for scholars interested in martial arts cinema. But more than that, the most impressive thing about White's text is the intellectual diversity of his material. In what is ostensibly a book about a specific sub-genre of martial arts cinema, readers will find refreshing and provocative considerations of martial arts practice and aesthetic representation, gender and representation, mixed martial arts and questions of martial and national histories and traditions, and cultural criticism and political theory. Not only is White up on all of the literature in and between cultural studies, film studies, and martial arts studies, he is able to – and does throughout his text – intelligently and productively engage with this literature, elaborating on and/or reformulating it for the purposes of his original contributions to these fields. It is one thing to produce a new standard text. That is hard enough, and I believe that White has succeeded in creating a new standard text for scholars interested in martial arts cinema. It is another thing to produce a new text that raises the scholarly bar. This is even harder to do, yet I believe that White has succeeded in doing this, too.

Speaking of legacies, White continues a tradition of martial arts cinema scholarship exemplified by the groundbreaking work of scholars like David Bordwell [2000/2011], Leon Hunt [2003], and Stephen Teo [2009/2015], while also continuing a tradition of culturally-informed martial arts and media study exemplified by the work of Meaghan Morris [2001, 2004, 2012] and Paul Bowman [2010, 2013, 2019, 2020]. For White's part, having inherited these legacies of scholarship, *Legacies of the Drunken Master* showcases a level of intellectual rigor, argumentative nuance, historical knowledge, and sheer enjoyment of subject matter that is much too rare in contemporary scholarship. For our parts now as readers – that is, as inheritors – of *Legacies of the Drunken Master*, we may pay tribute to White and continue the scholarly traditions to which he has provided such an important contribution by attempting in our own scholarship to rise to his level. This may be easier said than done, but then so is learning drunken boxing. The key, as we can learn from studying the kung fu comedies that White so intelligently and lovingly analyzes, is for us to always meet such challenges with a welcoming smile so that we may then overcome them with a triumphant laugh.

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