

Remediating the Star Body: Donnie Yen's Kung Fu Persona in Hypermedia

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Abstract

Latest decades have witnessed the proliferation of digital media in Hong Kong action-based genre films, elevating the graphical display of screen action to new levels. While digital effects are tools to assist the action performance of non-kung fu actors, *Dragon Tiger Gate* (2006), a comic-turned movie, becomes a case-in-point that it applies digitality to Yen, a celebrated kung fu star who is famed by his genuine martial dexterity. In the framework of remediation, this essay will explore how the digital media intervene of the star construction of Donnie Yen. As *Dragon Tiger Gate* reveals, technological effects work to refashion and repurpose Yen's persona by combining digital effects and the kung fu body. While the narrative of pain and injury reveals the attempt of visual immediacy, the hybridized bodily representation evokes awareness more to the act of representing kung fu than to the kung fu itself. The analysis will, thus, argue Yen's choreographic image becomes an instance of hypermedia, questioning the "real" kung fu and demonstrating the power of mediation in the digital era.

Keywords: remediation, hypermediacy, Donnie Yen, kung fu body, authenticity, stardom, digital effect

1. Introduction: The Kung Fu Body in the Digital Age

The 2008 martial arts hit *Ip Man* has been a cinematic and cultural phenomenon. The movie chronicles the life of Ip Man, a master of Wing Chun and the martial arts teacher of Bruce Lee. Donnie Yen's personification of the title character impresses the audience with the virile body and martial artistry in fight scenes. Notable scenes like Ip Man's combat with ten karatekas showcase the actor's signature series of quick punches, leaps and kicks, uncovering the ferocity of action. The movie propels Yen's vast following in transnational Chinese communities and his rise to border-crossing superstardom after his nearly-three-decade film career. The movie's popularity also evokes the Wing Chun craze that has taken Asia by storm. An influx of martial arts devotees in southern China results in a rapid growth of Wing Chun schools and a revival of the martial arts culture. Following the hype of *Ip Man*, a sequel *Ip Man 2* (2010), which is also a Donnie Yen vehicle, continues to celebrate the dynamism of the male body. While these two "Ip Man" features underscore Yen's Wing Chun dexterity, Wong Kar-wai's *The Grandmasters* (2013) alternatively casts the non-kung fu actor Tony Leung Chiu-wai as the key role. Unlike its precedents, *The Grandmasters* emphasizes less on the kinetic prowess than the highly stylized visuals crafted by digital effects, notwithstanding the remark that Wong's movie pays homage to the art form of kung fu. The digitally-driven aesthetics readily rekindle Zhang Yimou's martial arts epics *Hero* (2002) and *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), which are not lack of CGI scenes and actions (Russell, 2004; Elley, 2004; Macnab, 2014). Wong, moreover, creates the cinematographic spectacles of stillness and close-ups to frame the actors' movement, calling for the audience's awareness of the presence of cinematic devices in shooting the action. Nonetheless, media spotlight casts on Leung's four-year vigorous training of kung fu (Gilchrist, 2013) and his arm injury during shooting, attempting to attain a soaring degree of authenticity of the action (Trinh, 2013) while revealing how amateurish in kung fu the actor is. The movie earns agreeable reception in both critical and commercial circuits. It was premiered in Berlin Film Festival in 2013 and it grosses nearly \$63 million worldwide, rendering itself by far Wong's most commercially successful theatrical release. (Bordwell, 2013) The acclaim of the movie proves not only a shift from performers' body to digital effects in the kung fu genre but also digital media's potential of satisfying the viewers by elevating choreographic spectacle to new levels.

The emphasis of visual spectacle created through special effect is not a recent invention in Hong Kong cinematic kung

fu tradition. The 1960s witnessed a new cycle of local martial arts movies which reintroduced stock fantasy components of the old school and repackaged them with “modernized” special effects. (Teo, 2009, 87) Prominent examples such as *The Burning of the Red Lotus Temple*, released in two installments in 1963 and the *Buddha's Palm* series, released in five instalments from 1964-65, included special effects that are standard to the genre at the time. In the form of animation techniques, visual effects were directly drawn onto the celluloid to create the projection and power of rays and waves of inner energy or *qi*. In addition, photographic effects like double exposures, composite printing, reverse motion, fast motion, and superimpositions emerged. Filmmakers also employed wires to denote flying swords and weapon artefacts. (Teo, 2009, 87) The presence of these effects admitted fantastic human feats, establishing the aesthetic of mythical violence or action and the viewers are meant to see them. It widened the range of graphic possibilities of exhibiting choreographic spectacle, validating to the genre's tendency of applying artifice to physical bodies.

Latest decades have observed a proliferation of the use of digital media in Hong Kong martial arts cinema, which can be considered as an extension of the “artifice” practice in the 1960s. Film companies hire digital graphics specialists and computer effect experts who work to develop their craftsmanship. While new visuality offers the audience a world which mesmerizes the ubiquity of media technologies, it threatens the significance of the corporeal body of kung fu stars. Post-production effects such as two and three-dimensional computer graphics, digital morphing, animated images not only aggrandize the power of the acrobatics but also allow the invention in the computer of the bodily movements which are not physically feasible. Actors are no longer the sole means of eliciting choreography whereas digital graphics becomes a kind of performing agent. A well-known example is Andrew Lau's 1998 martial arts fantasy extravaganza, *The Storm Riders*, which is a watershed film in the martial arts genre in Hong Kong cinema. (HKIFF, 1999) Adapted from a popular local comic or “manhua”¹ called *Fung Wan*, it thrills the viewers with much-flaunted visual effects, which are impressive enough to Hong Kong, though not Hollywood, standards. Cantopop stars Ekin Cheng and Aaron Kwok, who have minimal martial arts background and are celebrated for their charismatic and modern look play the key characters, displaying the action of which digital effects work to “displac[e] the dazzling acrobatics,” (Kracier 1998) a quality often coupled with martial arts cinema. *Purple Storm* (1999), a big-budget, Hollywood-style Hong Kong action film, casts the young faces of the musicians-actors Daniel Wu and Josie Ho, alongside the veteran performers of Joan Chen and Kam Kwok-leung. The performers' high-octane actions are digitally augmented and modified, engendering spectacle for a terrorism-themed narrative. *The Twins Effects* (2003) portrays an action-adventure story of vampire slayer, which is not short of high-kicking, martial arts battles. Emphasizing more their photogenic charm than the acrobatic skill of the pop cast like the Cantopop girls' group Twins, Ekin Cheng, and Edison Chen, the movie exhibits occasional fighting which contains palpable wirework and special effect. Whereas images in these films are manipulated digitally, the choreography performed by real actors reverts to the stylized effects, remediating and problematizing the kung fu body which is vital in the martial arts genre. Based on the premise that the presence of digital effects are equivalent to the label of blockbuster films and thus for easy export, these films Hollywoodize the Hong Kong cinematic aesthetics, making it available to a wider audience.

Respective to intersection between Hong Kong kung fu imaginary and digital visual aesthetics in cinema, the 2006 kung fu film *Dragon, Tiger, Gate* is noteworthy in a way that it complicates the understanding of the kung fu body. The movie is based on a long-running “manhua” series named *Little Rascal*, which is later renamed as *Oriental Heroes*, created in 1975 by a renowned comic artist, Tony Wong Yuk Long. The narrative itself unfolds the imagination of heroism in the 1970s, depicting the trio heroes namely Dragon, Tiger and Turbo battle the threat of the triad gangs in a seemingly lawless world, revitalizing “a bygone era, where back street boys can fight for justice in the community.” (loveasianfilm.com) Set in a decidedly modern aura, the film version encompasses a repertoire of notably coded signs derived from the kung fu cinematic tradition, for example, the martial arts academy (recalling the ‘Jingwu men’ academy in Bruce Lee's *Fist of Fury*), the underworld as the imaginary *jianghu*, the personality of Yuen Wah -- a veteran actor in Hong Kong kung fu movies -- as Dragon Tiger Gate master called Wong Jialong. The movie perpetuates the emphasis on choreographic spectacle denoted in *Oriental Heroes*, which was the first title in the genre that the fights and action are vastly graphically illustrated. The overt graphic violence that includes vivid presentation of spilled blood, various weapon, internal organs, and bones led to the enactment of the Indecent Publication Law in 1975 in Hong Kong (Pilcher and Brooks, 2005). Regarding to its effort to stretch the boundaries of viewers' kung fu imagination and of the graphical display of action, the movie renders digital effects which are, however, applied not

¹ According to Wendy Wong (2002), “manhua” means “all the forms and styles of cartoon, comics, and *lianhuantu* (a traditional illustrated storybook)”. (11) “Manhua” encompasses an array of genres such as satirical and political “manhua,” comical “manhua,” children's “manhua,” and, one of the popular types, action “manhua”. (11)

only to the actors who have no martial background but also to kung fu star Donnie Yen. Yen is reputed for his physical prowess and authentic martial arts in his stardom. In the past decade, as the careers of Jackie Chan and Jet Li, the two pillars of Hong Kong's martial arts cinema, have waned with age, fans and critics have called for a new star to replace them; and Donnie Yen has ascended to fill the gap. Nicknamed 'The Strongest in the Cosmos' ('yuxiu zuiqiang') by the Chinese-language media, he impresses audiences with his authentic martial arts in a range of titles, on top of *Ip Man* (2008), such as *Empress and the Warriors* (2008), *Painted Skin* (2008), *Bodyguards and Assassins* (2009), and *14 Blades* (2010). While cinephiles and martial fans rejoice in Yen's gallantry and superb dexterity in physical fighting scenes, *Dragon Tiger Gate* (2006) disappoints some viewers because the film is loaded with visible traces of special effects, altering Yen's screen personality (LoveHKFilm.com). Then, in what manners Yen's kung fu physique is (re)mediated by digitality? How does the use of new visual media alter his star image? What does the discourse of "authentic" kung fu unpack about the dynamics between the corporeal and the digital? In responding to these questions, this essay will examine Yen's kung fu body marked by technological intervention in *Dragon, Tiger, Gate* (2006).

There have been many discussions on how the diverse media forms have changed the corporeal body of the actors, foregrounding the tension between the "real" and digitalized choreography. Michele Pierson's (1999) distinction between the "simulationist" effect and a "techno-futurist" aesthetic are, as argued, the twin adjacent vectors for considering CGI. Richard Allen (1997) uses the terms "projective illusion" and "reproductive illusion," the divergent logics of identifying the spectatorial perception of CGI. Olivia Khoo (2009) also analyzes the "mode of absorption" and the "mode of interruption" to contrast the model of spectatorship of classical cinema and of contemporary Chinese blockbuster films. (248) For my purpose, nevertheless, I find Jay David Bolter's and Richard Grusin's (1999) terminology of immediacy and hypermediacy, the twin logics of remediation, best foregrounds the complex nature of the star presence of Donnie Yen. According to Bolter and Grusin (1999), remediation is a defining feature of new digital media, representing of one medium in another (45). The concept reverberates to what Marshall McLuhan envisions in his seminal book *Understanding Media* (1964) that the "content" of one medium is always another medium. We can find a spectrum of various ways in which digital media represent, or remediate, their predecessor, unveiling the interplay between the new media and the "old" ones. In this conceptual framework, immediacy refers to the transparent, direct access to images, allowing the viewers to be immersive to the images whereas hypermediacy highlights the presence of the medium, inviting the viewers to interact with the interface. In this logical vein, this essay will consider *Dragon, Tiger, Gate* more as a text of remediation than a text of adaptation, interpreting the so-called "older" medium as the kinetic body of the actor, in contrast to the effect engendered by digital media. It will argue that the kung fu bodily representation in the film moves Yen's status away from genuine martial artist yet toward a new persona. By enabling a synthesis of digital visuality and kinetic dynamism in a single body, Yen's presence shows an instance of hypermedia, evolving from his established persona in previous onscreen and offscreen contexts. Integrating ideas in media studies and star studies, this essay will evince the potency of mediation, showing the ways it makes the kung fu body accessible to a broad audience in the media-rich, global environment.

2. The Promise of Kinetic Transparency

Logics of immediacy and hypermediacy show their routes that may differ, converge, or overlap, constantly working with each other in an intricate fashion. While *Dragon, Tiger, Gate* uses digital media in orchestrating and representing choreography, it unveils a tendency to disguise the use. The movie bears a marketable label of offering the immediate experience to the "real" kung fu action. Producer Raymond Wong positions *Dragon, Tiger, Gate* in contrast to other American-based comic-turned-blockbusters such as *X-Men* (2000) and *Spider-Man* (2002) that thrill the audience with visually compelling digital effects. In this regard, the use of kicks plays a part. Kicks, as a paradigm of authentic kineticism, connote photographic verisimilitude with attempted erasure of traces of mediation. Yen once confesses that kicking is "the guarantee of the real" in an interview on *Iron Monkey* (1993) directed by famous choreographer Yuen Woo-ping. Yen says,

"I believe kicking really identifies a person's ability... as opposed to just upper body movement. Because sometimes upper body movement, you can cheat it with... camera angles and different ways of cutting the film. For the kicking, you can't really cheat." (as quoted in Hunt, 2003, 35)

To highlight the realism in fights, *Dragon Tiger Gate* capitalizes on the superstardom of Bruce Lee who is well-known for his leg work and is nicknamed as "three-legged Lee." (Cheng, 1984, 23) Lee's leg work, too, is supported by his keenness of long takes and long shots as well as an evasion of special effect (Chiao, 1997, 29). As a fan of Lee, Yen has already demonstrated mastery of a variety of kicking skills in his earlier screen performances in *Tiger Cage I* and *II* (1988 and 1990), *SPL* (2005), *Flash Point* (2007), and *Legend of the Fist: The Return of Chen Zhen* (2010). *Dragon, Tiger, Gate* revitalizes Yen's connection with Lee's persona, by identifying kicks as a major technique and offering access to transparent kineticism.

Dragon Tiger Gate shows an overt use of kicks in a number of fight scenes. The fight scene in the Floating Restaurant is one example, among others. Two gangs of the White Lions and Ma Kun contest over the plague, a token of power within the LuoCha Cult. Less than five minutes since the film's opening, this scene appears to show Dragon's (Donnie Yen) and Tiger's (Nicholas Tse) first encounter after a long separation since childhood, hinting the tension between this pair of blooded brothers. Mimicking the famous floating seafood restaurant in Aberdeen, Hong Kong, the setting is made overwhelmingly Oriental with wall paper, carpet, big lanterns that are all red. The fight demonstrates exhilaratingly hyperbolized and superb acrobatics, assisted by the use of props like the delicately crafted wooden furniture. In the one-versus-many heroic brawl, Tiger exhibits his excessive kicks of various forms like high kicks, jumping split kicks, aerial triple kicks, roundhouse kicks, and jumping doubles kicks. The inclusion of kicks in the fight augments not only the aesthetics of leg flexibility but also the sense of martial authenticity.

One may easily observe, in this sequence, the enormous amount of kicks Tse performs but not a parallel volume of kicks is applied to Yen's action. Yen's part is marked more by the hand-to-hand combat that moves away from the centrality of the "real" kung fu marked by kicks, if not putting his martial ability at stake. Why? The diegesis seems to provide an answer. The opening of the film unfolds that Dragon acquires 'Eight Trigrams Palm' as he is taken away by his mother from his family. Not until his reunion with his blooded brother, Tiger, he learns the family kung fu, "18 Dragonslayer Kicks." Nonetheless, he has modified the technique by using more his hands than legs, justifying the dearth of his leg work. On top of such interpretation, an alternative points to the issue of star construction. Unlike Tse, Yen has established his martial arts image that he does not need the "kick" technique to make his action "real" or his choreographic image credible. Rather, his martial dexterity is reimagined through the personification of Nicholas Tse and Shawn Yue, the two main actors who have limited martial arts background. Comparing with his actorly performance, Yen's choreographic coaching more readily exemplify his martial power. Critics and fans acknowledge Yen's choreographic persona and he gained the nominations for "Best Action Design" in Hong Kong Film Awards with *SPL: Sha Po Lang*, *Flash Point*, and *Dragon, Tiger, Gate*, and won the honor with *Flash Point*. In her analysis, Lisa Funnel (2013) also elaborates Yen emerges as a preeminent action star choreographer that recalls the performance quality in the 1970s of the trained martial artists including Sammo Hung, Collin Chou, Xing Yu, and Jacky Wu, who are visibly cast in Yen's films. (126) As a choreographer, Yen favors graphically complex and physically challenging fight, unpacking the gritty nature of the realistic aesthetics. In an interview registered in the DVD of *Dragon, Tiger, Gate*, Nicholas Tse articulates,

I went up to Donnie and asked "What do you want me to do? You really want me to hit him right? He will faint, get deaf or blind. Awful things may happen." He replied, "If the shot comes out perfect, it is you who will take credit. Let the world know Hong Kong action films are not second to any. (quoted in Funnel 2013, 126)

By arresting the visceral responses of actors, Yen refocuses the corporeal dimension of screen kung fu. His physical demand appears to work against the cinematic mediation or artifice, permitting transparent access to "real kung fu". With the double roles of actor and choreographer, Yen oscillates between the onscreen and offscreen spaces, creating a demand for the local market of "Donnie Yen-style" action. (Funnel, 2013, 126)

The demand of stern action shapes media discourse of pain and injury that has become a star making strategy. Interviews and anecdotes reveal the intense physical training Tse and Yue receive. For example, chronicles of online entertainment news point out that Tse is wounded on the set yet insists on doing the stunts himself in pain (Ng 2006; huaxia.com 2005; souhu.com 2006). Risk and injury authenticate the flesh-body fights, echoing to Leon Hunt's (2003) scheme of corporeal authenticity, "measured by [levels of] stuntwork and physical risk." (39) An exemplary instance of this scheme is Jackie Chan. Chan's image is marked by his capacity of performing the death-defying stunts himself, without relying on doubles or stuntmen, and it is what defines his unique performative presence. Once he vaunts, "Look at Jurassic Park. Few people know the names of the actors; they remember the dinosaurs and that it was a Spielberg film. Take Terminator 2. The director's good; Schwarzenegger is nothing. Anyone could have played his part... But in Asia, everyone comes to see Jackie Chan in a Jackie Chan film. It doesn't matter what the title is or what the story is about. Only Jackie Chan can do it" (quoted in Reid, 1994, 21). Moreover, the outtakes of his movies uncover how readily he gets hurt during shooting. Commenting on Chan's action, Ramie Tateishi (1998) describes Chan as an "authentic subject" always presented on the "silver screen." (83) Mary Farquhar (2010), furthermore, analyzes that narratives of pain and triumph are regular elements of the star construction of Chan. His success of going through the tough training in the operatic tradition becomes a grounding block of the performative aspects of his stunts that elevates him to global stardom. Without doubt, it is difficult to compare Tse with Chan in the same category as kung fu performers. Yet the narratives of pain and injury about *Dragon, Tiger, Gate* fortify the sense of "real" kung fu, functioning as part of the star making strategy. As Yen elucidates to the press that the vigorous martial training he offers to Tse and Yue is "to make them [Nicholas Tse and Shawn Yue] authentic action stars" [my emphasis]. (loveasianfilm.com)

In highlighting how "real" the actions are, nonetheless, *Dragon, Tiger, Gate* utters a fascination with media. Yen once

explains in an interview, “In ‘Dragon Tiger Gate’ we will use the effect of film elements such as lighting, camera angles and props, together with an acceptable amount of ‘wire’ work so that these fantastical fight scenes become more grounded.” (loveasianfilm.com) Obviously, Yen’s account is inclined to a sort of discursive superficiality, without taken into consideration the illusiveness of cinematic kung fu. According to Stephen Teo (2009), the images of “authentic kung fu” are merely “representations of the real, involving different forms of resemblance and performance and a high degree of choreography” (70), or at most “edited fragments of real-time kung fu performances.” (ibid.) It is, too, made possible by a collaboration of filmmakers, performers and audience (70). Whereas Yen’s claim attests to an evading of mediation, he exactly affirms and foregrounds the presence of cinematic mediation. Considering that the discourse as such unfolds enthusiasm of the star vehicle like *Dragon Tiger Gate* to respond to a long-standing desire of cinema to “seduce reality” (Prince, 2012), making the easy promise of visual immediacy questionable.

3. Multiplying the Medium, Fragmenting the Space: A Frame for the Hypermediated Action Persona

Underlining the presence of media, *Dragon, Tiger, Gate* specifically realizes the idea of mobile cinema as the framing technique. As HyeRyoung Ok (2009) extrapolates, mobile cinema is a medium-specific mode of cinematic register borne out of the transition of media environment that conveys cinematic or televisual images as “digitalized content” through diverse display channels like mobile phones. (109) It experiments “the image-center narrative construction” (112) that is “spatio-temporal condensed and compressed” (ibid.), with regard to the technical condition of mobile screens. Works in this emergent filmic category tend to strategically mobilize the visual spectacles as a form of address to the viewers (ibid.), encouraging the medium awareness within them.

The medium-conscious feature of *Dragon, Tiger, Gate* is arguably extended from its comic version. The highly divided space of representation already exists in comics. As Sam Leith (2005) points out, “the filmmakers designed the film to duplicate the specific look of the stylized comic “as close to a frame-by-frame, panel-by-panel visual recreation of the comics as you could image...” (ART4) With the relatively raw graphics, the comic narrative is presented in a six-or-eight-square frame on each page. The multiple-frame presentational mode shows familiarity to the “windowed” style that is broadly adopted in the new media culture. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999) have referred such ‘windowed’-style presentation to the history of Western visual presentation. (33) The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw the general use of the secular cabinets that had a number of doors and drawers, with each painted with a perspectival genre scene or landscape. It embodies the multiplied space and the logic of hypermediacy. It is also an example of how the movie or “manhua” has remediated the earlier form of visual presentation.

Dragon, Tiger, Gate emulates the interfacial expression of the comic medium. A fight scene in the traditional Japanese restaurant unmistakably demonstrates the mobile cinematic aesthetics by offering a space which is heterogeneous and multiplied instead of consistent and unified. Set in the “Blade-Runner”-like, cosmopolitan area, the scene portrays the confrontation between Dragon (Donnie Yen) and Tiger (Nicholas Tse), accompanied by his folks. Dragon comes to request for the plague, a token of authority within the LuoCha Cult. After a brief negotiation, a bout explodes in the confined dining space. Marked by swift, handheld images, the scene orchestrates montages of tilt, crane, aerial, and close-ups, alluding to its capacity to overcome the physical limitations and exhibiting the bodily movements as clearly and exhilaratingly as possible. (Figure 1) Furthermore, a succession of crane shots depict the fleeing moments of Scaly with the camera turning clockwise and anti-clockwise alternately, creating a sense of chaos and confusing the viewers about spatial directions. At one point, hundreds of swordsmen dressed in black emerge into the scene from one side and fill up the space of the corridor. The swordsmen and Scaly move in opposite directions that the former advances forward for chasing Dragon where the latter recedes from sight. (Figure 2) The camera is hardly static. It follows the fighters to individual rooms, capturing the battles of which the trio heroes are involved. The visually divided space prompts the viewers to be extremely aware of the frame. Next, the camera zooms-out and results in an overhead shot of the three rooms with the street lying just outside. A mise-en-scene displays the dichotomies of fighting and eating, indoor and outdoor, characterized by distinct actions and rhythms (Figure 3). By and large, this scene depends on elaborate editing and multiple cinematographic techniques, underscoring the means of representation of action.

4. The Donnie-Dragon Nexus: Repurposing the Heroic Personality

The kinetic body of Yen is disturbed in a way that the film functions as a meta-commentary on cinematic kung fu. Cinematic kung fu is a cultural imaginary of which the genre becomes self-reflexive in its representation of “the real”. *Dragon, Tiger, Gate* is a filmic text drawn from another text, a comic series, and the choreographic presence has no referent to reality but to a fictional world. Yen’s authentic body denotes the corporeality that is blended with fictionality or technological reproducibility. The Donnie-Dragon nexus unveils interplay between the three personae: the actor Donnie Yen in reality (the real/original) -- the character Dragon in comics (the fictional) -- the character Dragon in film (the replica of the fictional). In this triangular structure of the meta-representation of personae, Yen’s kung fu presence is what Jean Baudrillard (2001) called a simulacrum, a copy without an original. Yen’s kung fu suggests no signified; it

is only an endless play of signifiers, copied from one media form to another. In other words, these images are no longer signs with referent; rather, they are the self-referential signs played on the surface of the cinematic representation without the structure of essence. Speaking of the caricatured depiction of Dragon, the simulacrum is solely available whereas the originality is a void conception informing no meanings at all. Such persona does not only foreground the opposition between “the real” and the simulated but also jeopardizes the legitimacy of the “real” itself.

The lack of referent in Yen’s persona exemplifies how *Dragon, Tiger, Gates* repurposes the cinematic personality. As Bolter and Grusin (1999) explicate, “repurposing” refers to the appropriation of the content, or “property,” from one medium in another, yet without quoting the original medium. (45) The absence of acknowledgement of the earlier medium works in the name of allowing audience’s seamless immersion because citing the medium in the new text disrupts the transparency to the logic of the diegetic world. (45) Apparently, the repurposing can be seen in the fact that the film remediates the comic. Yet I would like to argue such repurposing in terms of Yen’s persona. The film appropriates certain dimensions of Yen’s established image while not “quoting” his kung fu authenticity. Publicity materials inform that Yen’s contemporary, reticent, restrained personality makes him a plausible choice to reenact Dragon because he bears the capacity to “bring out the complex personality of Dragon Wong.” (loveasiafilm.com) As the narrative reveals, Dragon comes from a broken family and undergoes hardship in childhood before being adopted by a triad leader in his young age. Growing up in the gang, he is torn between justice and evilness. Such struggle readily recalls Yen’s impersonation of the cop heroes in *SPL: Sha Po Lang* (2005) and *Flash Point* (2007). But *Dragon, Tiger, Gates* does not copy the kinetic prowess of his personalities, leaving the bodily representation as ambivalent and volatile.

Arguably, the presence of Yen serves the purpose not of embodying martial techniques but of testifying how far a kung fu body can be transformed. One of the examples is the film’s final duel between the primary hero, Dragon and the key antagonist, Shibumi (Yu Kang). In the claustrophobic, inferno-like underground zone, Dragon confronts with Shibumi who has just prevailed over Tiger and Turbo (Shawn Yue). Shibumi wears a mask and the narrative never reveals his true face. To elaborate, he shows a kind of masquerade that he can be anybody and the originality of him becomes doubtful or irrelevant. His voice, moreover, is digitally dubbed and processed. It is the pure acoustic simulation in which the abstract signs are mere artificiality entailing no essential relationship to the authentic being. Exhibiting himself as a magnificent poser, Dragon displays his ready-to-fight demeanor and repeats the “cocky” trademark “bring it on” hand *gesture* to opponents’ (Hunt 2003, 43) of Bruce Lee. Dressed in a tight tank top, Dragon exposes his arm muscles and the contour of the muscular body, evoking the corporeal exhilaration as well as machismo sensitivity. At one time, Dragon, in a sarcastic tone, murmurs to Shibumi, “Is that all for Shibumi? You are so slow.” Whereas such dialogue line calls to mind Yen’s signature of rapid-fire pacing action, it shows no support to his bodily agility.

Digital visual effects overwhelm the action in the latter part of the sequence. The quick editing, the continuous camera movement and the sound effects work together to deemphasize the hero’s virile physique. After a montage of Yen’s forceful bare-hand combat, a series of “wire-fu” action, which is an amalgam of wire work and kung fu, follows. With the wire work, Yen exhibits gravity-defying body movements such as jerking through the air and walking on the wall. Whereas the elaborate cinematic techniques reduce the bodily potential, digital effects labor to complicate the performance. Viewers are conscious of visual effects that are added to the blows, punches and kicks in the name of magnifying the immense power of the performer’s body and generating visual enjoyment. Rather than immersing into the “narrative reality,” they experience a kind of Brechtian distanciation, being interpellated to the act of representation that engenders an alternative set of hermeneutics of the star persona structured within. This validates to a kind of de-familiarization and ambiguity of the identification of the star while calling for critical reflection on the kung fu visuals. All media is “a play of signs” (Bolter and Grusin, 1999, 17). Here Yen’s body is actually of no difference to Shibumi’s body, both “multipl[y]ing the signs of mediation” (Bolter and Grusin, 1999, 34) to compose the action performance.

5. Conclusion: Yen’s Kung Fu Body as a “New Medium”

The change of Donnie Yen’s body is a contemporary media event that viewers are attracted by the representation of kung fu more than the kung fu itself. Underlining the potency of mediation, *Dragon, Tiger, Gate* validates to the digital media’s capacity of representing the “older” content in novel ways. In the epoch of new media, the medium is of paramount significance in shaping one’s cultural and cinematic understanding, evidently echoing to Marshall McLuhan’s (1964) famous adage, “the medium is the message.” In this regard, Yen’s body is a new “medium” eliciting the “message” which shifts from kinetic authenticity to multiple possibilities of bodily representation.

Refashioning and repurposing the earlier “authentic kineticism,” Yen’s star body undermines any direct, simple contract with “real” kung fu. It implies a new language of bodily expressivity, raising audiences’ awakening to new realities/realisms that shapes the present cinematic spectatorship. The body does not aim to assert his kinetic prowess

over digital renderings; neither it to claim the persona disappearing into technology and becomes a mere effect. Rather, it makes the synthesis of digital media and the corporeal body visible. This new hybrid is not easily comprehended in a homogenous, determinate, unified cinematic space as it used to be. It is a novelty which does not necessarily endorse previous spectatorial experience, corroborating to an entirely different visual logic. His hypermediated and multi-media-driven body alters the constant dialectics of technology and corporeality, renewing the understanding of kung fu stardom in the epoch that media prosper.



Figure 1-3. Shots of the fight scene in the traditional Japanese restaurant (Resolution: 300 dpi).

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