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Introduction
In the late 1990s, recognizing the growing American fan base for Hong Kong cinema, American distributor Miramax developed itself into a dominant player in the distribution of Hong Kong martial arts films in the United States. However, as Miramax aimed to reach a wide audience, the films they released were often re-edited, re-scored, re-dubbed, and re-titled in such a way as to minimize the ‘foreignness’ and make them more appealing to American audiences (Dombrowski 2008). This paper examines the differences between these versions from the perspective of sound. By comparing the original sound aesthetics and the sound aesthetics of Miramax’s re-scores, this paper investigates how the aesthetic and affective qualities of martial arts sequences have changed. It does so through a consideration of David Bordwell’s analyses of Hong Kong cinema and Aaron Anderson’s theory of kinesthesia, and it will contextualize the discussion within the audio-visual trends as set by the films The Matrix (1999) and Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (2000).

Miramax and Asian Cinema
Miramax was founded in 1979 by Bob and Harvey Weinstein, and it specialized in the production and distribution of independent films. In 1992, Miramax launched ‘Dimension films’, a film company which focused on the production and distribution of genre films, but which also distributed a great number of Hong Kong actions films. In 1993, Miramax was bought by Disney, and thanks to the financial resources made available by the new parent company, Miramax was able to expand their activities. In 2005, however, Bob and Harvey Weinstein left Miramax after a dispute with Disney over the release of Michael Moore’s politically controversial film Fahrenheit 9/11. The Weinstein’s took the ‘Dimension films’ label with them, and founded a new film production and distribution company called ‘The Weinstein Company’ under which they continue to distribute Hong Kong action films.
Miramax started to focus on the distribution of Hong Kong action films in the mid-1990s after Quentin Tarantino triggered Harvey Weinstein’s interest in Hong Kong cinema (Dombrowski 2008). With the financial backing of Disney, and with Tarantino acting as trend-spotter, Miramax started to purchase films ‘containing stars beloved by the hardcore action fan base and genres that translated easily across cultures’ (Dombrowski 2008). Martial arts films from the early 1990s featuring established martial arts stars such as Jackie Chan, Jet Li, and Donnie Yen were especially popular. These include Tai-Chi Master (1993), Iron Monkey (1993), Fong Sai Yuk (1993), Fist of Legend (1994), and Drunken Master 2 (1994). However, believing that success with American audiences can only be achieved if cultural differences are minimized, Miramax would dub these films into English, re-title them, replace the musical score with one which would appeal more to American audiences, and cut those scenes which were deemed inappropriate or confusing.

This strategy was reconsidered after the huge success of Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (Crouching Tiger) in 2000. The film demonstrated that subtitles were not necessarily a turn-off for audiences, and Miramax started to explore the possibility of releasing films with subtitles instead of dubbed dialogue (Dombrowski 2008). The first film in the pre- Crouching Tiger period to receive such treatment was the 1993 film Iron Monkey; it starred Donnie Yen and was directed by The Matrix and Crouching Tiger’s action choreographer Yuen Woo-ping. However, even though the film retained its original Cantonese dialogue, its musical score was replaced by a new composed score and there were also minor cuts in the film.

Despite now less apprehensive about subtitles, Miramax still continued to modify Hong Kong films before releasing them to the audience. In many instances, these modifications have altered the fabric of the films considerably. As Dombrowski notes, Hong Kong action films tend to be more vivid than coherent, sporting both universal generic conventions and local cultural references, expressive physicality and extreme sentimentality, sophomoric silliness
and brutal violence, bizarre plot twists and shamelessly politically incorrect humor. In an apparent effort to have their Hong Kong releases adhere to the presumed expectations of mainstream American audiences, Miramax diluted many of the contrasting flavors that make these films so distinct. Miramax’s American versions frequently excise plot exposition, digressive episodes, local color, prolonged slapstick, graphic violence, and potentially offensive or culturally confusing sequences; alter the rhythm of scenes and the pacing of the film; and reorient character motivations and relationships. The end result is a product that can be marketed as different from what Hollywood offers yet similar enough to appeal to the average young male action. (Dombrowski 2008)

In particular, ‘these changes do not merely eliminate excessive violence and local color, and bring the Hong Kong original into conformity with the more tightly plotted, evenly toned films of Hollywood -- they actually alter the story that is being told, and the emotional effect the film is having on the viewer’ (Dombrowski 2008).

For many fans, these modifications have stripped off exactly those elements which make Hong Kong action films appealing to them. Consequently, in the early 2000s, they started to boycott Miramax and organized an online petition to stop the ‘mistreatment’ of these films. This action generated a great amount of media coverage and it even spurred online Asian film retailers to encourage consumers to avoid Miramax’s Hong Kong film releases (Dombrowski 2008). Although Harvey Weinstein has publicly responded to these issues (Weinstein 2004), little change has occurred. Not much later, however, the Weinsteins left the company and Miramax slowly moved away from the distribution of Hong Kong action films. The Weinsteins, however, retained the ‘Dimension films’ label, under which a great number of Asian films were shelved, and founded ‘The Weinstein Company.’ They subsequently established the ‘Dragon Dynasty’ label
and continued their activities of releasing Hong Kong action films under this new label. Most of their releases, however, would remain uncut and retain the original sound track.

**Sound Aesthetics of Hong Kong Martial Arts Cinema**

As mentioned in the previous section, Miramax’s modifications alter the fabric of the film. In this paper I will specifically focus on the aural modifications and investigate how Miramax’s re-scoring of the music and the sound effects influences the aesthetic qualities of martial arts fighting scenes. Aesthetics is hereby considered in a broad sense and is discussed in terms of its affective qualities and its interaction with the passions, morals, and tastes of individuals (Highmore 2011; Morris 2014, 68-69).

First, let us consider the stylistic characteristics of fighting sequences in Hong Kong action films of the 1980s and 1990s. According to David Bordwell, Hong Kong action sequences aim for clarity so that the audience can clearly see all the body movements and understand what is happening on-screen (Bordwell 2007, 400). Each movement (i.e. leap, fall, twist, punch or kick), moreover, is exaggerated so that it becomes infused with a kinetic and emotional energy; Bordwell calls this the ‘expressive amplification’ of action (406). Finally, by structuring the movements and shots through a pause-burst-pause pattern; that is, ‘the actor’s key movements ... are often separated by noticeable points of stasis’ (403); the sequence becomes endowed with rhythmic quality.

These stylistic characteristics are supported by the sound effects and musical scores. The sound effects, for instance, are often exaggerated to emphasize the power of each motion. Each punch, each kick, and each impact is heard, and it is often complemented with shouts, huffs, and puffs. The sound effects seldom drag on, and as a whole they possess a percussive and rhythmic texture that complements the pause-burst-pause pattern. The music, on the other hand, has a more narrative function. According to Katherine Spring, Hong Kong cinema of the 1980s and 1990s predominantly uses
synthesizer scores, and these scores are characterized by ‘extensive use of musical motifs as a means of coding characters and hence providing a sense of unity across temporally and spatially disparate scenes.’ Moreover, the music often functions to ‘establish a general mood or to draw attention to a character’s emotion’ and its placement is ‘determined by the dialogue and narrative action’ (Spring 2015, 43).

Within martial arts action sequences, then, the music aims to dramatize and highlight the physical and emotional qualities of the fight, and contextualize the whole sequence within the narrative.

So what effect do these action sequences have on the audience? According to Aaron Anderson, on-screen body-movements have expressive capabilities and are able to affect audiences (Anderson 1998, 2001). According to Anderson, the pleasure of martial arts films does not lie in the display of masculinity of the action hero’s body, but lies in the display of bodies in motion (Anderson 1998). Indeed, with the exception of Bruce Lee, martial arts stars such as Jacky Chan, Jet Li, and Donnie Yen are more admired for their spectacular display of bodily movements than for their body. And although editing have a great influence shaping the fight sequence, Anderson notes that editing ‘serves not to construct movement talent where it does not exist, but rather to highlight the actor’s movement talents as existing even beyond the editing.’ I do not entirely agree with this statement, as there are also many instances in which editing is used to cover up the shortcomings of the performer. At the same time, however, as Bordwell has demonstrated, editing in combination with martial arts choreography is able to express more than the bodily movement alone. The stylization of martial arts movements through careful choreography and thoughtful editing can add a musical and dance-like quality to the on-screen action, and influence the audiences’ reaction to these fights. According to Anderson, these stylized action sequences are not only able to convey a narrative, but they are also able to transfer emotions and evoke an affective response in a process called ‘muscular sympathy’:

Muscular sympathy ... refers to a physical, empathetic “feeling” evoked by the movement itself. ... Every person who has a body thus knows what it
“feels” like to move a human body through space. And every time a person sees another human body move, s/he implicitly understands what this movement might “feel” like. This feeling, itself, while expressed physically, includes emotional and psychological responses. (Anderson 1998)

These affective responses, however, are heightened when audiences encounter surreal movements:

Central to the idea of muscular sympathy is the innate knowledge that a body cannot conceivably be made to do anything that the body cannot do. Yet while this is necessarily true of live performance, film may manipulate human movement in ways that affect our kinesthetic understanding of that movement. Since editing techniques and special effects can create the illusion of bodies doing things and moving in ways they conceivably should not be able to, any bodily understanding of movement may take on new dimensions in relation to certain filmed images or movements. (Anderson 2001)

The ‘pleasure’ of watching Hong Kong martial arts action sequences, then, is to witness how the on-screen bodies endure hits and perform movements that borders the limits of the human body. The editing, music, and sound effects dramatize these actions so that the audience not only ‘feel’ the physicality of these movements, but also its emotion.

So how does Miramax’s re-scoring of the sound effects and musical score change these aesthetics? Looking at Bordwell’s and Anderson’s theories, it would seem that it does not matter much as sound is not often explicitly mentioned; editing and the visual display of movement seem to be more important. However, as we will see, sound is very important in shaping the audience’s relation with the on-screen action.

With regard to sound effects, the new sound effects often sound softer, smoother, more polished, and cleaner to the ear. There are also a lot of digital enhancements added to
it. For instance, movements are sonically prolonged by adding swooshes before and after the sound of the impact. Consequently, the aural texture has become much sophisticated. At the same time, however, it has diminished the percussive nature of the original sound track. The result is that the focus shifts from emphasizing the emotion of the physical movement to emphasizing the movement itself. This is actually not a big surprise when we realize that these aural aesthetics have developed out from the digital stylistics of the 1990s in which digitally enhanced spectacles were increasingly taking the centre-stage. The 1999 film *The Matrix* has hereby been an important milestone in this development. In that film, the fighting sounds are toned down and are less exaggerated when compared to the fighting sounds of Hong Kong cinema. However, to emphasize the superhuman nature and the visual spectacle of the movements of the characters, these movements would often be accompanied by swooshes and other digital sound effects. When using these stylistics to re-score the sound effects of Hong Kong martial arts, then, the clean and polished sound together with sonic enhancements to the movements will often interrupt the rhythm and make the sequence appear slower than the original.

As for the music in the film, the synthesizer scores are often replaced by acoustic scores. These new scores often display an oriental flavour through pentatonic motifs or Chinese (sounding) instruments. The majority of the score, however, is performed by a Western orchestra. Compared with the original musical score, the new score possesses less recognizable motifs. The scoring principles of using musical motifs and focusing on the narrative and character emotions, as mentioned before, is abandoned in favour of ‘episodic’ scoring that aims to accentuate individual sections. This, for instance, is illustrated by the 1994 film *Drunken Master 2* which was released by Miramax in 2000. In that film, Jackie Chan reprises his role as Wong Fei-hung. At the end of the film, Chan goes to the enemy’s warehouse to stop the illegal smuggling of national treasures from China. He confronts Ken Lo and his henchmen but is unable to beat them. In the sequence that follows, Chan fights Lo but is ambushed by one of Lo’s henchmen from behind. He is then kicked into red hot coals and subsequently falls from the stairs. During this sequence, the new musical score constantly changes motives to
accentuate the changing on-screen action and is interrupted by musical stingers that signify surprises. Not much later, when Chan gets renewed energy from drinking industrial alcohol, the action sequence that follows is accompanied by music with no recognizable motif and with no clear direction; it is constantly interrupted by comical interludes that try to accentuate the comical movements during the fighting. Musically, the whole scene feels directionless as the music merely aims to illustrate the movements on screen. In the original, on the other hand, the musical score has two long sections with highly recognizable melodies that are constantly repeated. The melodies express the seriousness of the sequence and allow the viewers to become involved with the emotions of Chan. Additionally, there is much more huffing and puffing. This combined with the original fighting sounds gives the sequences a much tighter rhythmic structure and allows the sound to work towards an aural and emotional climax in which we increasingly root for Chan and feel his rage.

Another musical strategy that is often used in Miramax’s musical re-scoreings is the use of Chinese percussion. This has largely been inspired by the martial arts hit *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and subsequent films such as *Hero* (2002), and *House of flying Daggers* (2004). In *Crouching Tiger*, the action sequences were underscored by a rhythmic Chinese drum pattern performed with Chinese percussion. This gave the film not only an oriental flavour, but also a dance-like quality. As a result, the martial arts sequences became something that was to be observed and something which was to be admired for its graceful movement. As Miramax employs the same musical stylistics to underscore its Hong Kong martial arts films, it turns the films’ martial arts movements into exotic visual spectacles and decreases the ‘muscular sympathy’ of the on-screen action as it distances the viewer.

**Conclusion**

In this short paper I have investigated how Miramax’s re-scoring of 1980s and 1990s Hong Kong martial arts films influences the aesthetic qualities of the fighting sequences. I have tried to argue that the original sound aimed to channel the emotion and physicality of these sequences to the viewer. It aims to make the viewer ‘feel’ the
punches and kicks, and it makes the viewer become involved in the fighter’s emotion. Miramax’s re-scoring, however, aims to focus on the visual spectacle of the movement itself. This is in line with the digital development of the 1990s where digital spectacles were increasingly setting the trend, and where Hong Kong martial arts choreography is exotized.

In the future I would like to expand this paper by framing it from the perspective of modernity. Miramax’s decision to re-score the music and sound effects might be interpreted as a strategy to remove the ‘foreignness’ and insert cultural familiarities for American audiences into the film, but it might also be seen as an attempt to erase those elements of the film which are not ‘modern’ enough. Indeed, Hong Kong films from the 1980s and 1990s were quickly produced and often featured sub-par audio(-visual) quality. Moreover, the films were often idiosyncratic as it featured a strange mix of comedy, action, drama, and slapstick. It was cheap entertainment for the masses and as such, Hong Kong films could be seen as ‘primitive’ and ‘vulgar.’ Miramax’s re-mastering of martial arts films from those periods, then, could perhaps be interpreted as an attempt to ‘elevate’ and ‘modernize’ these films. Within this modernization, martial arts becomes more of an audio-visual spectacle that is to be admired, and less of a stimulus of emotions and physical reactions from the viewer. This perspective could expand discussions of modernity and martial arts films from textual readings focusing of the role of martial arts in the modern world (Li 2001, 2005) to reception analysis that discusses the aesthetic and affective qualities of martial arts films.
References


