THINKING PUNCHING

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What looks real to the human eye often looks false to the film or video camera; the reverse is also true, and is perhaps more immediately obvious. Sometimes, due to the limitations of its monocular vision, the camera needs something extra. Certain things need to be sold; this is the domain of those actors who "receive" punches. Selling a punch, an art with origins in theatre, requires that the head snap to register impact, and the body go temporarily limp before spinning out of control. Careful attention must be paid to body positioning relative to lens. Perhaps no other performing discipline requires the actor to identify so heavily with the eye watching him or her. Further embellishment helps translate this quaint bit of stagecraft into seamless contemporary experience. The Foley artist whacks taped-up phone books and snaps celery to the rhythm of the scene. Foley artists too are becoming archaic when digital libraries of slaps and thumps already exist in profusion, echoes of those thousands of punches that landed before. Even if a Foley artist is still used, their gracefully choreographed smacks ultimately require digital tweaking. Finally the punches, slaps, and kicks are composed by editing multiple shots into a sequence. The movie punch is a sublime combination of contemporary image, audio technologies, and old-fashioned sleight-of-hand. What disappears is a few inches of space.

Miscalculation is injurious. An entire mythology has developed around the very real injuries sustained by Jackie Chan. Barring such an exception (which proves the rule because of its rich anecdotal content); one might hypothesize the real punch as an index of the documentary mode. Yet, the interpretation of such brutality is a delicate art: what impacts have these various staged or real punches in other contexts? Consider as an aside Zsa Zsa Gabor, her public life resuscitated by virtue of a real slap felt mainly in the imagination of a bemused audience. Such are the echoes transmitted by the force of punches.

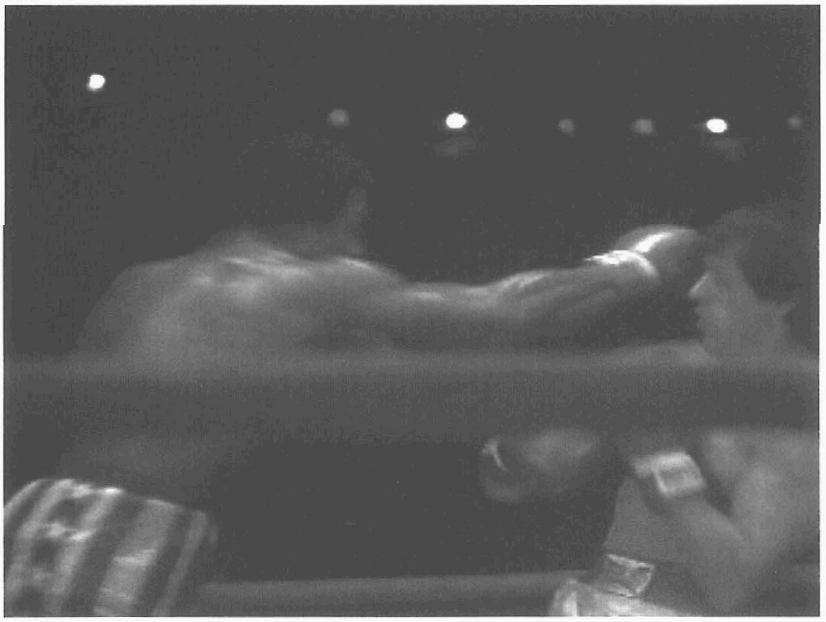
The movie punch has a long history and distinctive practitioners. The slapstick Stooges smack each other around like meat. Hope and Crosby's signature patty-cake routine always ends with a literal punchline. Batman's punches are captioned. The Duke employs roundhouses: big and loping, like his walk and talk. Bruce Lee's supernaturally intuitive strikes are straight, hard and accurate. His fighting persona is otherworldly: crazed

facial contortions, unearthly screeches, striated body parts and machine gun speed. The development of sophisticated fighting sequences within Hong Kong film subsequently raises the ante. The crossover success of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), the action sequences of the *Matrix* (1999), and the international profile of stars such as Jet Li exemplify the entry of this highly developed, even baroque, fighting aesthetic into the western cinematic consciousness. The challenge today is to find novel ways to fight: the search never ends for fresh kicks. James Wong's *The One* (2001), for example, manages a Jet Li punch-up with Jet Li by virtue of (barely adequate) CGI effects. Jackie Chan riffs on the idea of punching in *Rumble in the Bronx* (1995), a comedic ballet of fists, feet, skis, fridges, shopping carts, pool tables, rolling chairs, and pinball machines. A connoisseurship of punching emerges from the judgment of difficulty, timing, novelty, and speed. Savouring such artifice requires an audience to fill in the illusion, a capacity that is at once a sign of readerly productivity and an effect prompted by the text. Pleasure comes from knowing that space between fist and face exists, but is magically hidden by the collusion of willing eye and expert performance. There is also pleasure in recognizing the standards within which both improvisation and connoisseurship occur. There is something to be said for repetition.

One of the most familiar of the genre's norms is *the single protagonist battles multiple enemies who can never seem to get it together enough to attack all at the same moment*. The question is not whether it will happen, but what narrative excuse will be created within the film to justify the inevitable recapitulation of this scenario. *The One* is an entire film that builds up to such a moment. The climax has the evil Lawless banished to a penal colony over which he claims supremacy. After climbing a ziggurat, he is attacked. In the final scene, the camera slowly pulls back to reveal hundreds, even thousands of prisoners climbing the pyramid to get at Lawless, who by inference will spend eternity beating them down with his fists: an image of hell or heaven?

This raises another genre stereotype, that of a protagonist who is endlessly, serially bludgeoned. *Rocky* (1976) relies upon empathy for a pug being repeatedly beaten to shit. Many other films likewise put their faith in an audience's identification with a protagonist dying hard and harder. The effect of this empathy is a version of a dictum of Bruce Lee, one he elucidates in interview footage attached to the twenty-fifth anniversary video of *Enter the Dragon* (1973/1998): "Become one with the punch."

"Become one with the punch" is intended by Lee to encapsulate a notion of intuitive response that correlates to physical purity and honesty. It is the product of an inwardness marked by a direct connection between thought and action:



Top: Lee (Bruce Lee) refracted in *Enter the Dragon* (1973) dir. John Little
Bottom: Apollo Creed (Carl Weathers) punches Rocky Balboa (Sylvester Stallone)
in a scene from *Rocky* (1976) dir. John G. Avildsen

a unity of mind and body. Yet it is possible as a viewer to imaginatively feel—to *become one* with—punches exchanged on film. Clenching up one's own stomach prepares Balboa to be struck, while tightening one's fist helps him strike harder. One might argue that this is a common effect: punches felt collectively. As an extreme example, consider George Holliday's March 1991 footage of Rodney King, or the footage of Reginald Denny, the driver pulled from his truck and beaten on the street during the subsequent Los Angeles uprising. In an intricate process of mirroring, identification, and mimicry, the latter footage presents both the white Denny and his black assailants alternately manifesting Rodney King. This ambiguity was further exploited by a group opposed to police reform who used the Denny footage in a television ad. In an accompanying voice-over, the ad claimed the Los Angeles Police Department only wanted to do their job but weren't allowed due to poor leadership. Through such processes punches are redirected and delivered within a call-to-arms narrative, as if to say: "All of you have just been struck." King himself tried to counter "Become one with the punch" with "Can't we all just get along?"

That such beatings happen is not the shock of the King tape. What stuns is the way the documentary footage faithfully reproduces existing dramatic narratives. One such narrative is found in *Enter the Dragon*, where Williams, a black martial artist, is accosted by two billy-club brandishing LA cops with the query, "Where you goin', jig?" To a certain demographic, the shock of the King tape is the shock of the realization of urban legend, of something known only through tales. Even the camera filming King is shocked, unsteady and shaking; Holliday himself is in danger of getting too close, of watching too long. It is possible to empathize with the vulnerable eye that films King. To do the same for the helicopter flying above Denny is much harder.

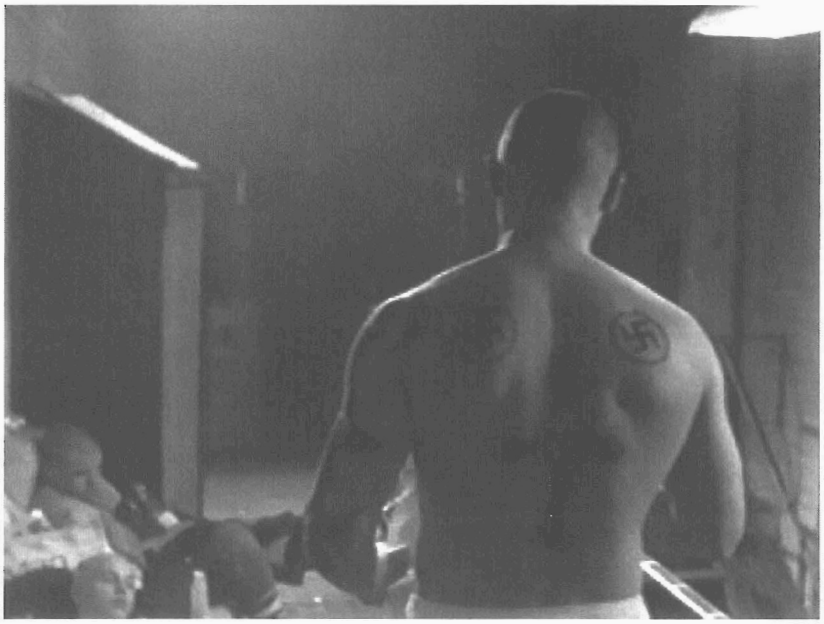
Now ubiquitous, the format of caught-on-camera television argues convincingly that shock and disruption can be integrated into the predominant cultural economy of signs. As in the King footage, which it formally mirrors, this genre displays the disciplining of bodies, subject not just to fists but to an economy of violent iconography: bad cops, drunks, skids, soccer hooligans, black and Hispanic gang members, white trash. Unlike the King or Denny tape, the mail-in footage screened isn't politically useful for group mobilization or contestation: it is leftovers or excess financially recouped, not unlike the endless pugilistic et cetera that concludes *The One*. Thieves deck convenience-store clerks, cops smack drivers pulled over for speeding, dads club coaches. Punches are pulled aside and set within acceptable genres, some of which are listed above. The fists land safely within established scenarios, scenarios that make identification with the scene's players difficult. Caught-on-camera

footage could find its usefulness as a training device for acting strategies based upon mimicry. Here the punching is that which is reserved or kept apart, studied, as all true arts are, in isolation; hence the sameness of the caught-on-camera footage, its predictable documentation of unpredictable behaviour. Bruce Lee speaks in terms of an aesthetics of purified punching; largely devoid of contextualizing narrative, caught-on-camera punches are also clean.

Sameness of output results despite the contingencies of input, in a process of purification. The method extends to the video eye itself, wherein a passerby with a handicam, a store surveillance camera, a news camera, a television camera covering a sporting event, and a camera mounted on a patrol car are all reconfigured as common tourists in a generic urban wilderness. Such aestheticisation—despite the fact that the punches themselves are artless, delivered by animals. The animal is an important iconographic element here: wilds need beasts.

But there is an art to punching like an animal. Consider Robert De Niro's portrayal of Jake La Motta in *Raging Bull* (1980), or the simian skinheads of *Romper Stomper* (1991). The acting theorist Konstantin Stanislavski argued that an actor does not fully take on the soul of the character, rather the actor searches for moments in his or her own experience which mirror the fictional life of the character. Bertolt Brecht pushes this notion of the distance between actor and character further, opening up the possibility for an actor to morally judge the character they play. But how is this read by an audience? Such thoughts return to the space that disappears when a punch is filmed: not necessarily the gap between face and fist, but between actor and character, and between witness and beaten body.

The predominant motif of *Romper Stomper* is the punch: endless racially motivated battles play out, boxing matches flicker across television screens, fathers and daughters slap one another, skinheads hit each other in demonstrations of affection. But the film itself is about processes of bonding. Taking turns pummeling a victim offers shared purpose. Bonding is also fostered through group identification, through fear, through notions of shared struggle, through romantic love and so on. Identification extends to watching the film itself: certain viewers may sense an uncomfortable feeling of elation as Vietnamese beat the shit out of beleaguered skinheads. I know someone who was at a screening of *Romper Stomper* in the early 1990s at Calgary's Uptown Theatre, an arthouse venue, when seven or eight skinheads entered as a group near the end of the film. That person was doubly terrified because she is Indian. The skinheads patrolled the aisles of the theatre, trapping the audience inside. In a demonstration of the power of identification, the skinheads conscripted the venue, the film and



Top: Vietnamese gang fights skinheads in a scene from *Romper Stomper* (1992) dir/wr. Geoffrey Wright
Bottom: Hondo (Russell Crowe) in a scene from *Romper Stomper*

its content. Cheers greeted the depicted murder of an Indian store clerk; what looks false to the movie camera often looks real to the human eye. The space of the theatre became not only a doubling but an inversion of the space depicted within film itself– –a mirror.

The most famous scene in John Little's *Enter the Dragon* involves a battle between Bruce Lee and the evil Han in a mirrored bathing and dressing room. Confused and lost amidst the myriad reflections and unable to find his foe, Lee suddenly recalls a tenet of his Shaolin teachings: "Remember, the enemy has only images and illusions, behind which he hides his true motives. Destroy the image and you will break the enemy." Lee's fists crash into the mirrors, destroying the reflections until Han is exposed. In *Enter the Dragon* the punch of an honourable person is a truth that destroys falsehood. But these are movie punches; there is a space between fist and mirror that only disappears through the collusion of willing eye and expert performance. The mirror may not exclusively be the instrument of falsehood, but sometimes of truth: it must have been difficult for Lee to position himself in front of the lens so as to hide the space between his fist and its target. There are many angles for him to consider, many mirrors threatening to alter, reflect, or even reveal the gaze of the camera's monocular view. The entire scene is thus a tease; its real subject is the glaringly absent camera that threatens to, but somehow never does, appear in the reflections. The mirrors must be smashed to grant attention back to Lee, and away from the apparatus within which he is contained.

Lee is editing, cutting his surroundings down that he might apply a final, definitive, narrative-ending blow. He is ending threats, including that of the camera itself. It is not unlike the premise of *The One*, which has Jet Li battle through parallel universes hunting down and destroying alternate possible versions of himself, absorbing their strength in the process. The Australian skinheads of *Romper Stomper* also take as their task editing, or cleansing, through punching. *Romper Stomper* depicts the futility of creating a clean and self-contained environment, although this is best proved when an audience inverts the narrative world of that very film. What does it mean to "Become one with the punch?" Bruce Lee's method of fighting is based upon notions of inner focus, of physical and mental unity. Even as Lee turns inward does not this principle make possible all manner of other reflections, doublings and echoes?