

A Matter of World Peace

An in depth discussion on Stephen Chow's 2004 film Kung Fu Hustle

The cinema industry of Hong Kong has a long and storied history. Giving us some of the most iconic movie stars even in western filmmaking . From Jackie Chan to Bruce Lee, Hong Kong Cinema has shaped Hollywood action scenes and has left its mark on the hearts of moviegoers everywhere. It's eccentric action is awe inspiring to both past and present audiences. Watching Jackie Chan in *Police Story* (1985) or *Drunken Master* (1978) knowing that the long action scenes are done until they are perfect, that there are no cuts between stunts commands respect. When compared to American films where the action is shot to allow for safe and easy breaks in the action, Hong Kong cinema allowed for the movement within them to speak further than the dialogue. Regardless, the decline of Hong Kong cinema has been evident since the mid 1990s. Yet through this, one visionary found a way to encapsulate what Hong Kong cinema is in its essence and created what I would argue is the greatest love letter to Hong Kong Cinema.

The Hong Kong native Stephen Chow's 2004 action comedy, *Kung Fu Hustle* manages to tell its story of destiny, while also retelling the story of the Hong Kong cinema industry itself. Though *Kung Fu Hustle* itself is not innovative directly, this ballad written by Chow deserves to be recognized not only for how it encapsulates Hong Kong cinema's techniques and themes, but also for its fantastic directorial approach that collects from multiple sources to build its own style that is fitting for the film. As well for its message of hope for Hong Kong cinema during a time of downward interest.

Firstly, to appreciate the directorial mind Chow has, it is important to understand what Hong Kong cinema is itself. Bordwell in his book *Planet Hong Kong* (Bordwell, 2000) discusses the themes and ideas that are prevalent within Hong Kong films, and discusses how these techniques and tropes were used to form a specific type of art cinema. One that is not like traditional western art films, but one that focuses on “richness of stylistic delivery- an effort to see how delightful or thrilling one can make the mix of music, sound effects, light, color, and movement” (pg 6). He goes on to also describe how this “over the top” style reveals itself. He describes how the “urge for kaleidoscopic variety prices momentary vividness above broad dramatic form”. Meaning in one film, you may have differing ideas that clash to bring out bright and colorful pieces that creates repeated impact, over a traditional one style film that may take small deviations but in the end remain within the scope of a singular genre. *Kung Fu Hustle* demonstrates this idea throughout the movie and this “scavenger aesthetic” is clearly evident even in the film’s initial scene.

Kung Fu Hustle opens on a lone police officer frozen as you can hear the sounds of violence off screen. The camera takes its time to travel through the police department as we see the 1940s era clothed police frozen as the beating continues, It is not until the sign “Super Crime Fighters” is broken that the movement of characters is evident. It is at this moment that we learn to our surprise that some of our characters are dressed akin to an American western film. With brown and greys, wearing what can only be described as a modern cowboy hat. As they leave the station, we are treated to a traditional western stand-off. Dramatic window and door slamming included. Yet, it is at this moment that the Kaleidoscope starts to take shape. The mobster inspired Axe Gang clearly does not belong in this western film, with their well pressed suits, top hats, and pension for hatchets. However, it is with the

introduction of the dancing scene after the slaughter of the Crocodile Gang that audiences are fully pulled into the Kaleidoscope that Chow is building.

This cut and paste of tropes to build dramatic and visually stunning movement based “dialogue” is continually carried throughout the film. And some of the tropes Bordwell calls out by name even appear within the film. The three masters within Pig Sty Alley, are shown only to be normal people until they are needed to know martial arts, Sing’s lips bruise instantly after being bitten by snakes, and he is even shown to be able to heal miraculously. This last trope actually being used as a masterful element by Chow to allow for another element of Hong Kong cinema to appear without breaking the humorous tone of his film. Brutality.

Bordwell speaks on the brutality of Hong Kong films, and suggests that it spawns from an “questionable impulse” in “search for powerful sensations” (pg. 8). This brutality is essential to Hong Kong cinema. The article *Two dragons: Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan* also discusses the never ending chase to create brutal scenes for the sake of spectacle. From Jackie Chan falling through trees in *Armour of God*, to the coal bed scene in *Drunken Master II*. This raw violent style is a necessity to the Hong Kong style, and Chow balances this brutality and his comedic nature perfectly. For every leg chopped off by a thrown axe, there is a mob boss kicked into a barrel with a broken back. For every woman shot in the back, there is a man falling from multiple stories and surviving with only a bruise from a potted plant. Chow’s world allows for this brutality by creating a world of cartoon physics. A world where scenes lifted from old *Looney Toons* episodes would fit right in with the rest of the film and its antics. In fact we see one iconic Wile-e Coyote scene recreated, spinning legs included, appear later in the film.

This cartoonish nature is also paramount to the film's story, and is relied on when Chow is directing. With so much action and a core story about gang violence, Chow is forced to rely on these cartoon-like gags to maintain the humor within the topics and to not sullen his audience. However, this counter balance is not the only way Chow uses cartoons to direct. He also uses these gags hand in hand with other directorial techniques to strengthen the individual style of *Kung Fu Hustle*. For example the use of lighting in the film is by far one of my favorites of the films I have seen. Take the opening scene, where the Crocodile Gang walks out into a red lit sky; a clear omen by Chow that blood is coming soon.

He also uses his lighting to distinguish our villains from our good guys throughout the film. When our two main characters Sing and Bone first come to Pigsty Alley, the daylight is a cue to the audience that these guys are not actually as evil as they say they are. Chow even doubles down on this idea when he has a dark cloud follow in the actual Axe Gang members, engulfing the daylight sky that was there moments before showing that these are the true villains of the story. Though the gag may look weird, Chow uses these gags as a framing device for the rest of the film. We are shown early on that darkness is evil and light is good. So when the audience sees Sing still in light even when he is formally accepted into the Axe Gang, it is a big clue that he is still very much a good person even if he has been accepted to this ruthless gang.

These gags are only the beginning of Chow using the form of the film to balance the comedic nature of the film. He continually manages the audience's expectations to maintain the beats of the film. Slowly feeding the audience clues of what will happen next if they look close enough but never outright telling them until necessary. His first use of this technique is in the introduction of Pigsty

Alley. He shows us the three masters and their weapons far before we ever see them in action. He has the framing of the camera show us Coolie's feet, Tailor's rings on his clothing racks, and Donuts staff, and gives the audience the idea that those three items are important to their respective owners, however it is not until we see them in action does it click with the audience. Chow has been setting these three seemingly minor characters up to be the heroes of Pigsty Alley from the start of the film.

Chow also uses this technique to do the opposite, and uses it to routinely subvert the expectations of the audience. When we see the members of Pigsty Alley cower to the landlady and say that they are all willing to die to Sing, the audience is told that these residents are weak and only have strength in number. However, immediately this is subverted for the sake of comedy. Sing asks to one versus one someone and quickly learns that no one in this slum is who they say they are ("farmers don't fight"). Though Chow uses these instances humorously, if one is paying attention to the entire scene you see he once again telling the audience the nature of the three men previously mentioned. He geniously tells the audience who to focus on, while not at all showing them to be important.

However, it is when Chow mixes his skill over his audience and his dedication to the art behind Hong Kong cinema that his genius becomes evident. And while this is seen repeatedly throughout the film, I believe the chase scene between Sing and the Landlady is the best example. After getting into some hijinx, Sing is inevitably chased by the Landlady out of town in a call back to the Road Runner cartoons. Yet, throughout the first quarter of the film, we have seen the Landlady to be a tough woman, she rules with an iron fist and seems to have inhuman speed. As for Sing, we have only seen failure in his goal to be an Axe Gang member, ending up injured in his assasination attempt of the Landlady.

At the start of the chase the audience is all but told that Sing will be caught. He is running slower and is injured. Yet as both parties start to gain speed, it becomes evident where Chow is pulling his inspiration from. Once this reference becomes evident the outcome of the chase becomes clear. If the audience knows the trope behind Road Runner, they will expect Sing to get away, but if they do not, what they expect to happen is immediately thrown out the window by the Landlady hitting the billboard. This scene shows just how good Chow is at controlling what his audience is expecting. He somehow is able to use both techniques he has shown previously within one scene later on. Allowing for the entire audience to react differently depending on which of the techniques they have focused on and are expecting him to use.

While I believe Chow is a genius in his use of lighting and framing, I believe in fact there is one scene that shows that he excels in all areas behind the camera. The fight scene with the Harpists. This scene uses lighting, management of the audience and more importantly sound to create one of the most memorable set pieces in the film. This scene starts with Coolie walking out of town past one of the Harpists. In a case of dramatic irony, the audience knows that the music playing is deadly, however the Coolie does not and ignores it. However as the audience watches the scenery around him get cut, they can only hope that he will notice in time. When he unfortunately dies we are cued into the fact of just how strong these adversaries are comparatively.

Yet it is in the introduction of the Tailor that Chow starts to show off. Setting the Tailor in the light in continuance of his lighting style, he has the first attack come from behind a black cloth. An attack in the darkness that the Tailor barely dodges. But at first glance we notice that the music that was instrumental in the death of the Coolie is absent. Instead as the fight between the two continues the

blows start to resemble a drum. The rings make up the hi-hat and the blows make the kick drum. This drum from the action is the only music in the scene at this point, and causes the audience to expect the Tailor to win. But it becomes evident once they two fall into the street that this drum is the tempo behind the guzheng being used. Meaning once the Harpist starts up again and the soundtrack starts up again, it becomes clear that this was a losing battle at the start. Chow has used the music and the action together to build up the action and prepare the audience for what is coming.

Therefore when the audience is expecting Tailor and inevitably Donut to die in this attack, Chow subverts expectations once again. Throughout the fight, Landlady and Landlord have been interrupting the fight due to the noise, However, once Donut and Tailor are beaten, we hear Landlady yell and the Harpist are wary of another master within Pigsty Alley. However, instead of Landlady who we have seen do superhuman acts, it is Landlord who appears. Using a form of “Drunken Master”, he beats the two Harpists up. And while the audience may be confused as to why he has stepped in as he has shown no talent, it becomes evident when looking back into how he was introduced. Drinking. His weapon was already cued to the audience. Likewise, when Landlady steps in, her weapon is one we saw before. Her voice and her power to yell.

When all these aspects come together, it's clear that Chow has been setting up this entire battle from the introduction of Pigsty Alley. He has used music and the lack thereof to show the defeat of the three masters, but it is in the complete opposite of music that the savior is found. The important pieces to this battle have been slowly drip fed to us, and Chow has been managing his audience's expectations with his technical prowess to build a masterpiece of an action scene the entire time.

Though this scene is a technical masterpiece, it is also important to both the plot in *Kung Fu Hustle* itself and the allegorical story Chow is telling. On the surface the story of *Kung Fu Hustle* fits in with traditional Chinese story telling. A story about destiny, with some “One” that comes to bring peace to the world is nothing new. However Chow uses this story structure as a device to tell the personal story of Hong Kong cinema as an industry.

To many this may seem like a reach, as how could an action comedy from the early 2000s be a take on the real world, especially when the content is so cartoonish in nature? Well it becomes apparent when we look at who the 3 masters represent. Chow has been vocal with his appreciation for Chinese martial arts films of the past, and it's clear that these films are the influence for Coolie Tailor and Donut. Donut is a clear reference to Wuxia martial arts films with his almost flight-esque movement. Coolie and his kicking style is flashy and more akin to a Jackie Chan film, especially compared to the strikes used by Tailor that are more useful in combat as is the style of Bruce Lee.

While Wuxia, Chan, and Lee are staples of Hong Kong cinema especially in the mid 20th century, their influence was not everlasting, Wuxia films slowly fell out of popularity, Chan started to make movies for Hollywood and Lee's death prevented him from continuing his career. And while they are not directly named, these deaths of Hong Kong cinematic culture are on full view within *Kung Fu Hustle*. Moreover they are used to tell the story of *Kung Fu Hustle* as an art piece itself. To tell the story of the rebirth of Hong Kong cinema.

To tell the rebirth of the genre, however, Chow also has to tell the story of its death. Using the American mobster inspired Axe Gang, I would argue as a stand-in for Hollywood and its empirical control over cinema in the 80's and 90's. He opens the film by having Sum tell the Crocodile Gang that

their men joined him. Conveying to the audience that Hollywood has started to import Hong Kong stars, and with the massacre of the Crocodile Gang, the downfall of Hong Kong Cinema is inevitable.

Furthermore, when the Harpist discusses the three masters, they say that “their fighting days are past them”. Meaning that the days where Wuxia, Chan, and Lee films controlled the entertainment world have been over for a while. And while they are still able to fight, evident in the Chan inspired Coolie saving the children and the two others joining in, they no longer are the masters of martial arts films they once were. Therefore with their death in the film, Chow is telling the audience that these films are dead. Not in the literal sense, but that their time as the leaders of Hong Kong cinema is over.

With their deaths, however, we are shown two more masters, and though I struggle to find exactly what movement Chow is referencing here, I argue that these two masters are in fact Martial Art films themselves. This would seemingly go against my previous statement that the old masters are dead, however even though the three masters are no longer in the forefront, martial arts films are still prevalent within the cinema sphere. Films such as *Kill Bill*, *Karate Kid*, and even children's movies such as *Kung Fu Panda* show how impactful martial arts movies are to cinema history. Thus even with the death of Hong Kong cinematic greats at the hands of Hollywood, there are two more masters waiting to maintain Hong Kong's cultural role.

This role, however, cannot rest solely on the shoulders of martial arts as an idea. Instead Chow uses this film to hoist himself into the role, his self characterization of Sing the “one” shows the audience that he believes himself to be the next “master” of Hong Kong cinema. And his claim is not completely far-fetched. With the release of *Shaolin Soccer* and evidently *Kung Fu Hustle* He maintained the top two spots on the list of highest grossing domestic films in Hong Kong history until 2011.

Yet, Chow even goes one step further in his writing of this allegory. He uses the Beast character to awaken Sing's potential, and with the casting of Leung Siu-lung as the Beast Chow uses his childhood hero to further demonstrate to audiences that this film is his awakening as a leader. For the uninitiated, "Bruce" Leung was considered the "Third Dragon", to Jackie Chan and Bruce Lee's "Two Dragons". And more importantly was Chow's childhood action hero. However, Leung was nowhere near as successful as Lee and Chan, and was forced to step away from movies in the 1980s. Yet Chow still brings him back for the role of his final antagonist, the Beast.

When writing I struggled to find exactly who the Beast is referencing, however I don't think that the inspiration for the character is important, instead the casting is. Leung is the last of the Three Dragons, and is held to a high regard in the film. His strength awakens Sing's true potential, and in defeats he asks to be taught. This can be seen as Chow using Leung as his stepping stone as a director, he uses this iconic martial arts actor to awaken his true potential as a leader and with the conclusion of this film he himself has become the next master of Hong Kong cinema. Having even the greats bow their heads and ask to be taught.

Whether the audience takes Chow's claim as the new master is irrelevant to this story, instead Chow is just a stand in as the leader to what one could hope would be the revitalization of Hong Kong's entertainment world that had been on the decline since the 90s. And while we have yet to see Hong Kong cinema reach the heights it once was at, I cannot help but praise Chow for his attempts. And while his attempt on the surface is an absurd action comedy with a bit of a reliance on crude humor, when we look deeper into his film we see masterful dedication to the art and a heartfelt love song to Hong Kong cinema. One that masterfully uses Chow's directorial experience, the Hong Kong

style, and a powerful story of the industry to lead the audience on a journey they won't forget. And it is this journey that I believe is so important to cinema history, and why I believe that *Kung Fu Hustle* deserves not only recognition as a film, but also to have a spot within the curriculum we teach when looking at Hong Kong Cinema as a whole.