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**NO STUNT DOUBLES! NO CGI! NO WIRES!: A Comparative Study  
of Thai, Indonesian, and American Martial Arts Cinema.**

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**NO STUNT DOUBLES! NO CGI! NO WIRES!:** A Comparative Study  
of Thai, Indonesian, and American Martial Arts Cinema.

by

**Hector Enrique Gonzales**

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## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this Thesis to my family who has supported me through disappointments, heartbreaks, tribulations and triumphs. To my mother and father, I would like to say nothing I have ever done or will do would be if it weren't for your guidance, patience, and love. Jini, Carol, Myrella, Rick, Martin and all the kids, thank you for everything. This is for you.

To my friends and co-workers thank you for supporting me along the way as I indulged myself in this quite silly endeavor. Special thanks to Taylor, Jordan, and Derek, thanks for having my back the last 4 years.

To Larry, thank you for the gift of martial arts, it and you have truly changed my life for the better.

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And finally, to Raine, thank you for being my rock and my light. I would have given up by now if it weren't for you. I love you and this is for us.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge that although this thesis is at times critical on the stunt and production practices of certain films and filmmakers, I truly believe the works discussed here are some of the very best films of the martial arts genre. Though my critical analysis is a product of the academic process, I remain first and foremost a fan. I consider myself a filmmaker and choreographer in addition to being a scholar and because of this, I have the utmost respect and admiration for my fellow filmmakers, martial artists, and stunt professionals. The work done by the individuals discussed in this thesis and those that contributed to it elevates every film and scene they are in. This thesis is intended as a celebration of those martial artists and stunt performers and hopes to serve notice to those reading it that all of the scenes and films discussed here are the result of long hours of training, collaboration, and artistry.

## Abstract

# **NO STUNT DOUBLES! NO CGI! NO WIRES!:** A Comparative Study of Thai, Indonesian, and American Martial Arts Cinema.

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This paper is an argument that stunt and choreography trends in Thai and Indonesian martial arts films produced from 2003 to 2017 represent a conscious effort on the part of the filmmakers to produce fight scenes which are continuously chasing jaw dropping spectacle, with less and less regard to the human cost associated. Specifically, I examine 2 of the most successful films from each country, *Ong-bak* and *The Protector* from Thailand and *Merantau* and *The Raid: Redemption* from Indonesia, and trace the trends and production methods of each film. The global success of each is seen as a justification for the relative lack of safety protocols in the design of each action set piece. The films creators and performers freely admit to chasing the chosen aesthetic in an attempt to have their films stand out for thrill-seeking audiences. This expectation of spectacle translates to increasingly dangerous choreography, stunts, and real physical contact between main actors and stunt performers. This paper attempts to question the necessity of these methods. As a contrast, I also examine the United States stunt industry and successful U.S. action/martial arts films produced during the same time frame. Specifically, I examine the *Bourne* and *John Wick* franchises, in hopes of determining the necessity of production methods used by Thai and Indonesian film industries.

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## INTRODUCTION

The martial arts genre of cinema traces its origins to silent films capturing operatic performances produced in China in the 1920s. The oldest recorded film in the genre, *Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* (1928, d. Shichuan)<sup>1</sup>, debuted in 1928 on Shanghai screens. Since that time the codes, conventions, and methods inherent in the genre have been adapted by filmmakers from many nations and infused with each new director's sensibilities and stylistic flourishes to create a genre so broad and diverse that multiple sub genres encompassing sci-fi, fantasy, drama, comedy, romance, and more have branched out from those simple operatic origins. It is this understanding and adherence to the codes and conventions of the Martial Arts genre by international filmmakers that allows for a multitude of interpretations. Crucially, it is also what allows for so many examples of nationalistic appropriation of these films. This is most often exemplified in the national martial art of a particular country featured and performed by the films hero in a traditionally simple narrative structure, with a central protagonist often standing up for their fellow countrymen in the face of foreign aggression. We see this in several of the most notable films of the genre such as *The Chinese Connection* (1972, d. Wei)<sup>2</sup> in which Bruce Lee, returning a sign reading "Sick Men of Asia" to a local Japanese dojo after it has been left at his school, must use his impressive kung fu skills to dispatch the twenty or so students and their teacher, thus proving a point about Chinese strength in the face of Japanese antagonism. This trope of martial arts skill used in the pursuit of national pride, strength, and respect is also seen 40 years later across Asia in *Merantau* (2009, d. Evans)<sup>3</sup>. In that film, the hero Yuda, played by Iko Uwais, must use the traditional Indonesian martial art of Silat to free several local women

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<sup>1</sup> *Burning of the Red Lotus Temple*, Directed by Shichuan Zhang (1928; Shanghai: Mingxing Film Company), Film.

<sup>2</sup> *The Chinese Connection*, Film, Directed by Lo Wei (1972; Hong Kong: Golden Harvest, 2001), DVD.

<sup>3</sup> *Merantau*, Film, Directed by Gareth Evans (2009; Jakarta: PT. Merantau Films, 2009), DVD.



cruelly co-opted and coerced into a sex trafficking ring led by an Australian businessman. Films from Thailand, Korea, Brazil, China, the U.S., and others follow this template of simplistic narratives draped by action set pieces and heroes who must stand up for what is important to them. Often this stance leads the protagonist to unwittingly stand up for their country as well. The simplicity in the narrative conventions of the martial arts genre, allows for greater screen time to be devoted to what can be argued is the greatest draw of martial arts films, the fight choreography.

Whether it is the films of the iconic Bruce Lee, the slapstick comedy of Jackie Chan, the splits of Jean Claude Van-Damme, the swiftness of Parkour, or the grace of Tai Chi, each and every martial arts film is understood to have action and choreography as central to the narrative of its storytelling. There are a multitude of martial arts films in the history of cinema but it would seem the most successful and noteworthy are the ones which leaves audiences impressed by the choreography, returning to the films over and over again in hopes of recapturing the thrill of their initial experience. Consider the recent success of *The Raid: Redemption*(2012, d. Evans)<sup>4</sup>, a film made in Indonesia on a \$1 million dollar budget which went on to gross \$14 million worldwide. The late Roger Ebert noted, in a negative review:

What am I to say? "The Raid: Redemption" has a rating of 93 percent on the Tomatometer. It is being hailed as a breakthrough in martial-arts films. There is obviously an audience for the film, probably a large one.<sup>5</sup>

His reticence at recommending the film notwithstanding, *The Raid* was an undeniable international hit. As *Variety* pointed out in their film review:

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<sup>4</sup> *The Raid: Redemption*, Film, Directed by Gareth Evans (2012; Jakarta: PT. Merantau Films, 2012), Blu ray.

<sup>5</sup> Roger Ebert, "The Raid: Redemption - Review," *RogerEbert.com*, 03/21/2012, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-raid-redemption-2012>.

Moviegoers may wish the projectionist could replay some of the spectacular sequences in this cop-vs.-gangster fight-athon... the pic manages to create the sensation of a kind of live-action ride, where Evans as conductor modulates the rise and fall of action, and alternates pace and volume, with selected interludes of story to catch one's breath. The effect is exhilarating for viewers open to the sheer visceral sensation of the physical experience, regardless of one's predilection toward fight pics.<sup>6</sup>

It is the fight choreography which leaves that impression on audiences. In showcasing that choreography, Martial Arts films center physical combat in their narratives. These fight scenes often results in severe physical pain and/or death for its characters who engage in acts which we as societies have deemed dangerous, unnecessary, and illegal to resolve their conflicts. Additionally, the physicality on display may be breathtaking to behold but it can be extremely dangerous to the stunt crews which are tasked with topping previous film fights and creating more impressive scenes with the intention of leaving a lasting impression on audiences. One needs only to watch the credits of any Jackie Chan movie to see a sequence of outtakes documenting the physical toll Chan and his stunt team inflicted on each other during production. As Chan is hardly the only filmmaker who puts in these outtake sequences at the end of his martial arts films, it seems that in the production of films of the genre, accidents can and do often happen. Given my own unique experience in this genre, it is also clear to me that for some filmmakers, the physical toll taken on the set by the performers is not only anticipated, but by design, it is expected.

For the past 6 years I have worked as a fight choreographer in and around Austin, Texas. I have chosen not to pursue this full time and am not a SAG-AFTRA member, but I have worked with many professional martial artists and stunt performers. Nonetheless, I have choreographed

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Koehler, "Review: The Raid", *Variety*, 9/10/2011. <http://variety.com/2011/film/markets-festivals/the-raid-1117946038/>

fights for over 25 independent feature films, live demos, and graduate thesis films through the University of Texas including the first 3D graduate thesis in the country, *Hard Reset 3D (2016, d. Chetty)*<sup>7</sup>. I understand that accidents can and do happen, as do the people with whom I work, and stunt performers in film industries in general. No individual wants to sacrifice a life for a film, regardless of how impressive the box office results or the popularity of a film may be. And yet it is clear to me that the very real pride and excitement of being in a truly amazing and unique action scene or fight drives these stunt teams, my own included, to push ourselves and our craft further and further. As one of my fellow martial artist/stuntman, Aaron Alexander, has said, “I’m not really in this business of the entertainment industry to get famous. I’m in this to create. I want to continuously create and the stunt group 87Eleven, *Merantau*, Bruce Lee, the movie *The Raid*--these people and films have inspired me to do more.”<sup>8</sup>

It is precisely this drive to do more which leads stunt performers, choreographers, and directors of the martial arts genre to center increasingly impressive action at the forefront of their films. While all of these filmmakers share the understanding that martial arts films must be a showcase for physicality, not every film does this successfully. However, in the last 15 years, several key films and filmmakers have pushed the envelope of physical contact on screen for the sake of thrills and what seems to be an aura of authenticity. All of which can be summed up best in pull quotes from various posters and advertising material touting “No Stunt Doubles, No Wires, No CGI!” and “The Best Martial Arts Film of This Decade!”. These quotes are from promotional posters for *The Protector (2004, d. Pinkaew)*<sup>9</sup> and *Merantau* respectively. Both films originate from countries with developing national film industries, *The Protector* from Thailand

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<sup>7</sup> *Hard Reset:3D*, Film, Directed by Deepak Chetty(2016; Austin: Buk Films, 2016), Digital 3D.

<sup>8</sup> Aaron Alexander (SAG-AFTRA Stuntman), interview by Hector Gonzales, June 16, 2017, interview 1, transcript.

<sup>9</sup> *The Protector*, Film, directed by Prachya Pinkaew (2005; Bangkok: Baa-ram-ewe/Sahamongkol Film International, 2005), DVD.

and *Merantau* from Indonesia. Each has garnered much acclaim for their stars and directors and has pushed forth many careers onto the international cinematic stage in films such as *Furious 7* (2015, d. Wan)<sup>10</sup> and *Star Wars: The Force awakens* (2015, d. Abrams)<sup>11</sup>, both of those billion dollar grossing films representing massively reaching global franchises. Both *The Protector* and *Merantau* as well as several others from the same production teams have at their core standout action sequences which require actual physical contact from all of its stunt performers.

For instance, in one of many stand-out sequences from *Ong Bak*, star Tony Jaa must fight his way through a horde of enemies when one approaches him on a motorcycle. Jaa deftly maneuvers around the driver and in a single full frame shot leaps high enough to knee the driver in the head actually shattering his helmet in two down the middle. When viewing the film one could be forgiven for believing the helmet was designed to break away, thus there was little danger for either performer. Yet, a view of the behind the scenes features clarifies that although it is indeed a prop helmet the physicality of the stunt is anything but safe. In the featurett we are treated to multiple takes of the driver taking the hit, each time rising slowly and wincing in pain. This degree of physical contact by performers seems to stand in contrast with safety and stunt regulations of many national film industries the world over and yet this very real physical danger in pursuit of authentic action seems to be precisely what the filmmakers intend.

Crucially, *The Protector* and *Merantau* as well as others with the same style of physicality on display by the same production teams, have also helped garner greater attention on the cinematic world stage for their respective national film markets. Prior to these releases, films produced by Thailand and Indonesia drew little commercial or critical attention. But what makes them so successful?

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<sup>10</sup> *Furious 7*, Film, directed by James Wan (2015; Los Angeles: Universal Pictures, 2015), DVD.

<sup>11</sup> *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, Film, directed by J.J. Abrams (2015; Los Angeles: Walt Disney Studios, 2015), DVD.

In this thesis I seek to explore several questions related to this idea of inherent danger in the pursuit of cinematic authenticity. What aesthetic codes and conventions are found in martial arts action scenes which are easily identifiable to audiences the world over? Is this success gauged only by box office income or fan recognition, lengthy careers, and greater cinematic exposure? What are the differences in safety protocols in martial arts films between the U.S., Thailand, and Indonesia which allow these films to feature such seemingly dangerous set pieces that are not only to be anticipated by audiences but expected of the stunt performers? How are martial arts films from these developing film markets received by critical and commercial audiences which seem to validate the risk and danger inherent in the production of these films?

In this thesis, I analyze two films each from Thailand and Indonesia to establish an understanding of why such physical interaction between the performers is deemed necessary by the filmmakers. I have chosen these films based on their commercial popularity, critical acclaim, and impact on subsequent films in the genre domestically and internationally. By discussing these films, their production methods, the narrative content and aesthetic conventions therein as well as their associated marketing materials and reception by audiences, it is my hope to create as fair and comprehensive an understanding as possible of the production practices of the filmmakers and, crucially, the reasoning for it. Additionally the reception of these films are viewed through both a critical and commercial lens in an attempt to establish quantifiable measures of success attributable to these films. Finally, I will discuss two martial arts films produced during the same time frame in the U.S., with the same criteria in hopes of supporting an argument for greater regulation and safety guidelines for the actors and stunt professionals who risk life and limb in pursuit of cinematic success on screen.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Before we can establish what makes these films successful we must first understand the definitions and intentions of martial arts films. Central to this understanding is the relationship between martial arts films and choreography. David Bordwell argues that martial arts films are “Pure Cinema, popular fare that, like American Westerns and gangster movies of the 1930’s, seemed to have an intuitive understanding of the kinetics of movies.”<sup>12</sup> In addition, I would argue that this assessment of martial arts films, particularly the ones reviewed in this study, supports the argument that choreography is a core convention to the genre, and thus of great relevance to the success of these films. Audiences engage directly with the sights and sounds of human movement in service of story. It is the swiftness, grace, and pure command of the human body that is impressive, leaving the viewer unsure that they could ever match the physicality of the onscreen fighters. In reality, martial arts skill is attainable by every person on the planet given access, instruction, time, and repetition. Yet simply possessing an astute command of the human body alone is not enough to endear these films to new audiences discovering the established classics of the genre, nor is it enough for the die hard fans who clamor for the next great martial art film. Physical performance of any kind whether it be martial arts, dance, or sports, can be quite impressive on its own, but devoid of any context or situational markers of story, conflict, and resolution this performance is little more than a rote pattern of movements. But, I argue that there exists a familiar structuralism in martial arts films that is recognizable for audiences the world over, regardless of the language of the country from which that film is released.

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<sup>12</sup> David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and The Art of Entertainment*(Cambridge: Irvington Way Institute Press, 2000), pg. x(preface).

To codify a structure which can be applied to the films I discuss in this work, I looked at other systems of organization in storytelling and found a great deal of similarity with the work of Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*<sup>13</sup>. Martial arts films and folk tales cannot be considered completely indistinguishable from one another, a simple examination of theme, tone, and purpose of several examples of either genre will show vast differences in storytelling and narrative paradigms. Thus, not all of Propp's morphology can be applied to martial arts films but in defining a structure for the genre there remains much that can be seen as analogous. Specifically, I was drawn to the concept of 31 Functions that Propp applied to Russian Folktales because I believe Martial Arts films share the codes and conventions of a narrative system defined by the sequences that lead from one to the next. For example, Propp argued that:

- All fairytales are constructed on the basis of one single string of actions or events called 'functions'.

For this work, I believe the same can be applied to the martial arts film. If, as I have argued earlier, the draw of martial arts films is the action and choreography then we can consider the contextual application of the physical(action/choreography) in any given scene to be thought of as what I would term an *action beat*, analogous to a "function" in Propp's model. Thus each action beat defines a sequence, but also propels a character to the next sequence comprised of the next action beat. Other applicable points of Propp's criteria are:

- Function is a significant action or event defined according to its place in the plot.
- Function, and not theme, motif, character, plot or motivation, is the fundamental unit of analysis.

Again, the importance of the 'action beats' of martial arts films cannot be overstated. The entire point of a martial art film is to showcase, draped within the context of a narrative

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<sup>13</sup> Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), p.19.

framework, the skillset of the performers. When aligned with the Propp's criteria we can see that the concept of action beats can be interpreted as interchangeable with functions if we apply that criteria to martial arts films instead of folktales.

Two other points of Propp's criteria are applicable in creating a structuralism for the martial arts genre. The first is:

- With (codifiable) exceptions, functions always follow a strict order.

This is directly applicable to a wide range of successful martial arts films that define the genre. A film like *The Raid* provides the codifiable exception to the structure that will be used to discuss the other films here. But that film's singularity of structure, tone, and style aside, it still follows a narrative arc. That arc is comprised of action beats which define each sequence and lead both the characters and the story to the next beat, essentially defining the 'system' of the film and genre. Thus, even with anomalies such as *The Raid*, Propp's morphology can be successfully applied to the martial arts film genre as a whole. Finally, and most importantly:

- All fairytales share the same fundamental structure.

Similarly, when we look at examples of the martial arts film genre we come across the same basic structure. A hero/heroine who uses his/her skills and through action beats moves from one sequence to the next, will finally arrive at a final conflict or fight against the film's main villain. These action beats, analogous to athletic performances, culminate in a climax in which the protagonist will obtain the goal through the most complex or most impressive physical fight



or athletic performance, overcoming the obstacles placed before them by the antagonists.

Throughout the film, these physical skills, in service of action and story beats, are presented through an avatar for the audience; the main character, the hero/heroine, the protagonist.

If we can accept martial arts films as analogous to folk tales because of storytelling tropes as well as an adherence to several of Propp's criteria, then we can accept a structure for martial arts films that consists of several story and action beats that lead audiences from the beginning of the film to the end. Further, if we define martial arts films as almost always following a same fundamental structure then the characters which inhabit those films can be seen as similar in many ways. If those characters choose to engage in conflict/resolution with only their bodies and not with the modernity of human warfare, that choice, no matter the contextual reasoning for it, could be considered a fundamental convention of a martial arts film. Thus, these characters must be seen to embody preconceived archetypes considered necessary constructs of the genre. Carl Jung's work in his study of the human psyche as interpreted by Carl Golden in his breakdown of the "12 Common Archetypes" support my theories of martial arts characters as established archetypes<sup>14</sup>.

As Golden notes, "Most, if not all, people have several archetypes at play in their personality construct; however, one archetype tends to dominate the personality in general." This is true of martial arts films as well. In fact I would argue that if a film casts a martial artist who must carry the film as a lead then there will be a major reliance on a single archetype to define that character, especially if the martial artist is new to acting. We see this in several of the films discussed here as well as across the genre in films in which a martial artist acts for the first time

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<sup>14</sup> Carl Golden, "The 12 Common Archetypes", *Soulcraft*.  
[http://www.soulcraft.co/essays/the\\_12\\_common\\_archetypes.html](http://www.soulcraft.co/essays/the_12_common_archetypes.html).

such as Bruce Lee in *The Big Boss*(1971, d. Wei)<sup>15</sup>, Gina Carrano in *Haywire*(2011, d. Soderbergh)<sup>16</sup>, or Chuck Norris in *Way of the Dragon*(1972, d. Lee)<sup>17</sup>, etc.. However, as that martial artist continues to act in various stories and narratives, other archetypes may become present in the characters they inhabit and the performances they deliver. Similarly, if an esteemed actor is cast in a role in a martial arts film then several archetypes will be represented in the character because of that actors particular range, experience, and approach to that character. For the most part there are two main archetypes which define the protagonists of martial arts films as described by Jung: *The Hero* and the *Innocent*.

*The Hero* is a prominent archetype in the genre. This archetype is driven by a core desire to prove one's worth or achieve their goal through courageous acts. They display an expert mastery in a way that improves the world. For this interpretation, they are defined by their physical prowess in martial arts, and a competence and courage that associates them with the warrior, crusader, rescuer, or superhero.

The second archetype which defines most protagonists is *The Innocent*, found most often in martial arts films which I consider "introductory films". These films feature a previously unknown actor/martial artist, an unknown director or filmmaking team, or a showcase of a martial arts style that has rarely been seen on-screen before. The archetype of *The Innocent* is defined by a goal of doing things right and the character is often seen as naive, faithful and optimistic with a chief fear of being punished for doing something bad or wrong. Fittingly, the films discussed here demonstrate a separation of those archetypes for filmmakers and actors who work together from an "introductory film" into a second feature. As audiences become familiar

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<sup>15</sup> *The Big Boss*, Film, directed by Lo Wei (1971; Hong Kong: Golden Harvest, 2004), DVD.

<sup>16</sup> *Haywire*, Film, directed by Steven Soderbergh (2011; Los Angeles: Relativity Media, 2011), DVD.

<sup>17</sup> *Way of the Dragon*, Film, directed by Bruce Lee (1972; Hong Kong: Concord Production/Golden Harvest, 2008), DVD.

with a particular martial arts actor's ability from a previous film, they identify them as a more than capable hero in subsequent films. However, it is precisely because “introductory films” showcase the previously unseen that their protagonist, more often than not, combine the archetypes of *The Hero* and *The Innocent* into one character. In order to endear an actor or performer to an audience for the first time the film must portray them as naive and optimistic enough to confront danger. Simultaneously the protagonist strives to protect those in need when other characters turn away in the interest of self-preservation. Finally, the protagonist is painted as strong enough and skilled enough in martial arts to affect change and defeat the story antagonists. In fact this choice, and more importantly, the ability to act is one of the most important traits of the protagonist in a martial arts film.

Ben Judkins describes the protagonist in martial arts films as an ‘active protagonist’:

In a screenplay, or even a photograph, there is usually little question as to who or what the protagonist is...academic theorizing, whether interpretive or positive in nature, also forces us to focus our attention on certain key actors or variables. In the hands of a skilled story teller, active protagonists reveal their character to the audience not through exposition, or as victims of fate. Rather, the actions that they take reveal their core identities, values and strategies for navigating a challenging environment. In our own writing, we can replicate this insight by remembering that individuals often join martial arts groups precisely because they seek to make changes in their own lives or in their communities.<sup>18</sup>

These key actors and variables are embodied in the main characters and exemplified by their skill in martial arts. Judkins point about an individual joining a martial arts groups out of a desire to affect change in their lives contextualizes the lure of martial arts films as audiences root and cheer for a main character who does not sit idle while forces of destiny, or more precisely the needs of the script, act upon them and their close friends and family. Armed with only their

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<sup>18</sup> Ben Judkins, “Five Years of Kung Fu Tea: Making Martial Arts Matter” *Chinese Martial Studies* (blog), July 27, 2017. <https://chinesemartialstudies.com/2017/07/27/five-years-of-kung-fu-tea-making-martial-arts-studies-matter/>.

bodies, protagonists actively seek to solve the conflicts presented to them, necessitating conflict resolution in which humans are pitted against each other devoid of any machinations of modern warfare. That there is usually some convenient reason to come to blows in hand-to-hand combat rather than with gunplay is not a hinderance. It is expected by fans of the martial arts genre.

Additionally each fight found in a martial arts film is in itself a miniature story comprised of a beginning, middle, and end. Regardless of the style, structure, and particulars of the choreography each of these fights establishes a particular goal significant to the protagonist of the fight and the obstacles they must overcome in order to achieve their goal. Sometimes this can be as simple as a character needing to get from one side of a room to another, sometimes an entire school, village, or even the world can be at stake.

Through this dominant reliance on choreography, martial arts films share a natural commonality with films of the musical genre. That is, they are situated in the modes of performance that exist at an intersection of cinematic language, human movement, and sound. Richard DeCordova discusses this in his work in *Film Genre Reader IV* as he discusses both the importance of performance and it's "fairly marginal place in genre studies". As DeCordova mentions, "other aspects of film seem to lend themselves to conceptualization in a way that performance does not...it manifests itself so differently in different genres that it seems to call into question the coherence of the concept itself."<sup>19</sup>

One thing DeCordova mentions about musical choreography which is distinctly atypical of martial arts films is "the song and dance, typically put forward as the spontaneous creation of amateurs, becomes a misleading but extremely malleable metaphor for the cinema as a whole." While the performances and fight scenes in martial arts films are indeed extremely malleable,

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<sup>19</sup> Richard DeCordova, "Genre and Performance" in *Film Genre Reader IV*, edited by Barry Keith Grant (Austin, University of Texas Press, 2012), pg. 148.

these scenes are no more unexpected or out of place than a character walking down the street. In fact, the audiences expects the characters to regularly showcase their skills- and not just to the audience, but to the other inhabitants of their cinematic worlds. For example, in Bruce Lee's classic film, *The Chinese Connection*. He portrays, Chen Zhen, and is introduced as the best martial arts student in his hometown, and is treated as such by every other character in the film. In both *Merantau* and *Ong Bak*(2003, d. Pinkaew)<sup>20</sup> the main characters demonstrate their remarkable ability to impress minor characters early on in their narratives; demonstrations that let both the background characters and audiences watching know that they can expect much more from the main character.

The performances, while every bit as technical, physical, or impressive as dance numbers, are deliberately placed in the narrative and often the only recourse available to right grave wrongs. DeCordova states, "the spectator knows very well that the actor and character are not the same, yet at the same time they must believe that they are for the film to work." This is absolutely crucial for martial arts films as well. Whether it be Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, Donnie Yen, Tony Jaa in the films of Thailand or Iko Uwais from Indonesia, the actors in these films are not only associated with their characters skill set, but are expected to showcase these authentic skills in subsequent films and in more ambitious scenes.

The issue of authenticity is paramount when viewing martial arts film studies through a critical lens. Fight choreography itself can be used in any genre of film, from John Wayne and Victor McLaglen's 10 minute fight in *The Quiet Man*(1952, d. Ford)<sup>21</sup> to Adam Sandler and Bob Barker's tangle on the back 9 in *Happy Gilmore*(1996, d. Dugan)<sup>22</sup> and every genre in between.

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<sup>20</sup> *Ong-Bak*, Film, directed by Prachya Pinkaew (2003; Bangkok: Baa-ram-ewe/Sahamongkol Film International, 2003), DVD.

<sup>21</sup> *The Quiet Man*, Film, directed by Henry Ford (1952; Los Angeles: Agrosy Pictures, 1998), DVD.

<sup>22</sup> *Happy Gilmore*, Film, directed by Dennis Dugan (1996; Los Angeles: Universal Pictures, 1998), DVD.

However, as Judkins mentioned, an ‘active’ protagonist is the key to an audience's acceptance of that protagonists’ story. Similar to audiences’ reception of musicals, a spectator expects to see the performer’s authentic skills represented on screen, and seeing and accepting a protagonist fully perform that skill becomes a primary factor in a film's success both critically and commercially. A portly Chris Farley swing his arms throughout the action scenes of *Beverly Hills Ninja*(1997, d. Dugan)<sup>23</sup> for comedic effect is not quite the same as watching Donnie Yen fight 10 black belts at once in *Ip Man*(2008, d. Yip).<sup>24</sup> Conversely, authenticity, or lack thereof, is an argument that is used to critique martial arts and action films produced in the West, and specifically America. That is, there is a clear understanding that the action stars of the West are more often than not being doubled by stunt persons and this carefully constructed ‘performance’, so important to the success of martial arts films, is obscured by camera angles and editing. These are ultimately rejected by audiences seeking the authentic. As screenwriter Dena Pech argued in an article for digital magazine *Movie Pilot*:

With choreography comes physical acting, the art of non-verbal dialogue. One of the reasons Asian martial arts movies remain the standard is because choreography can speak on its own. It’s physical acting with real emotion, and therefore, no dialogue is needed to convey the action. Legendary physical actor Jackie Chan is a prime example of the latter. His fight sequences show emotion that speaks louder than words. Most action stars overseas are successful, partially because of their martial arts awesomeness, but it’s mainly choreography that guides their way into the unknown. They dedicate themselves to practice long before shooting begins. Mastering the action prior to filming shows the trust and respect in the actors’ abilities.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Beverly Hills Ninja*, Film, directed by Dennis Dugan (1997; Los Angeles: Tristar Pictures, 1999), DVD.

<sup>24</sup> *Ip Man*, Film, directed by Wilson Yip (2008; Hong Kong: Mandarin Films, 2008), DVD.

<sup>25</sup> Dena Pech, “What The American Action Movie Needs to Inherit From Asian Filmmaking”, *Moviepilot*, November 24, 2016. <https://moviepilot.com/p/what-the-american-action-movie-needs-to-inherit-from-asian-filmmaking/4144545>.

When Jackie Chan was asked by *IndieWire* about the state of martial arts movies produced in Hollywood he replied:

Martial arts films are difficult to shoot, it's not easy, you know. But, in America they're so good! They're so clever! They can use special effects and computer graphics to make everybody become an action star. Even you can be an action star in America! Sometimes, the action is even better than my action! Like in "300," I was like "Wow! That's so good!" So, they spend a lot of money to create this kind of action and I think it's ten times better than mine but they don't really use the action. Liam Neeson, for instance, is not an action star, but they can use a small shot and make him become an action star. There's actor action star and there's action star. It's different.<sup>26</sup>

This authenticity of performance is also crucial in attracting viewers because of the language barrier which separates international audiences. As such, the choreography acts as the dialogue which can be understood by multinational audiences. Since the choreography is central to the conflict and resolution of martial arts films, most of the narrative beats are imbued with a non-verbal understanding of who the hero, the villain, and the conflicts are as well as the strength and skill of those characters. For example, in Hong Kong a young girl practices her "Da". In Bangkok an older gentleman throws what is known as a "Mat". In Jakarta a young boy hits a heavy bag with a "Pons". In Rio De Janeiro two friends trains against each others' "Soco", and in Japan a master shows his students a proper "Tsuki". No matter the word used in any language, the physical motion of a punch is exactly the same the world over and can be understood in motion when seen on-screen. When Bruce Lee punches the villainous Han in *Enter The Dragon*(1973, d. Clouse)<sup>27</sup>, it means the same thing to the viewer in spite of the country or language the film is viewed in. Because of this, the choreography essentially allows the narrative of the films to be understood across the globe regardless of the language the performers are

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<sup>26</sup> Jackie Chan, interview by Tara Karajica, *Indiewire*, April 28, 2015. <http://www.indiewire.com/2015/04/jackie-chan-on-why-hollywood-isnt-producing-good-martial-arts-films-anymore-62584/>.

<sup>27</sup> *Enter The Dragon*, Film, directed by Robert Clouse (1973; Hong Kong: Warner Bros, 2013) Blu-Ray.

speaking. For martial arts films, physical gestures replace language as the primary discourse of communication.

Rob Wilson argues that martial arts films create a “Bio-poetics of trans-pacific globalization” creating “Uncanny” filmic paths back and forth across the globe<sup>28</sup>. Specifically he argues that the imagery from martial arts action films creates “ghosts” or haunting imagery that can equally exist in every type of film and pushes themes identifiable to audiences the world over. This imagery, he argues, is reflected in martial arts films, as well as many other genres found in Hong Kong and Asia, in a ‘global hauntology’ offering images, genres, and narratives of spectral critique. It is the simplicity of the genre’s tropes and scenarios which leads to these images, scenes, and films connecting to audiences regardless of where in the world one views them. As Bordwell himself would note in *Planet Hong Kong*:

Despite many claims to the contrary in our multicultural milieu, there are more commonalities than differences in human culture: universal physical, social, and psychological predispositions and the facial expressions of many emotions will be quickly understood in a film, whatever it’s country of origin.<sup>29</sup>

It can be argued that the choreography is the greatest asset of martial arts films because the language of human movement permeates almost every narrative beat and each action beat leads the story from sequence to sequence. It leads the characters from their beginning to their end. As central to the genre, fight choreography is important to both the particular approach a scholar may take while analyzing a film and rationale for the critical and commercial success of

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<sup>28</sup> Rob Wilson, “Spectral Critiques: Tracking “Uncanny” Filmic Paths Towards a Bio-poetics of Trans-Pacific Globalization”, in *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema*, ed. Meaghan Morris, Siu Leung Li and Stephen Chan Ching-kiu (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), pg. 253.

<sup>29</sup> David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and The Art of Entertainment* (Cambridge: Irvington Way Institute Press, 2010), pg. xi (preface).



any film of the genre. Perhaps just as important is the authenticity of choreography in endearing the film to audiences around the globe by dazzling spectators at the abilities of performers, stuntmen, heroes, & villains. As Bordwell summarizes, “the martial arts films produced by Hong Kong are important because they are ‘outrageous entertainments’ replete with ‘remarkable inventiveness and careful craftsmanship’ which represent ‘Hong Kong’s most important contribution to global cinema.”

Bordwell believes that martial arts films of Hong Kong are more than easily dismissed schlock or low brow cinema and can be important sites of study. Similarly, I argue that martial art films from around the world comprise these “important contributions to global cinema”. There is no single country which produces martial arts films of greater importance than another, it is the entire genre itself which is the important contribution to global cinema. From the similarity in structure of the stories they tell to the archetypes that inhabit them, the films that constitute the genre can be molded and imbued with perspective, significance, and commonality, reflecting multitudes of experiences the world over and demonstrating that principle no matter the language. Ultimately, in the language of human movement, a kick is still just a kick and a punch is still just a punch.

## Methodology

As I have argued, a martial arts film tells the story of its characters journey with a reliance on choreography to showcase fighting as a catalyst propelling its narrative from action beat to action beat and eventually enabling its characters to resolve its central conflicts through physical force. To establish this axiom, I intend to present case studies of specific fight scenes in two martial arts films each from three different countries for a total of six films. From Thailand, I will examine *Ong-Bak* and *The Protector*, and from Indonesia *Merantau* and *The Raid*. All of these films have been produced and released within a 15 year period from 2002 to 2017. As a contrast, I will also analyze two films produced in the U.S. during this time, *The Bourne Ultimatum*(2007, d. Greengrass)<sup>30</sup> and *John Wick*(2014, d.Stahelski/Leitch)<sup>31</sup> to showcase what I believe are successful martial arts films which adhere strictly to safety guidelines set by the U.S. actors union, SAG-AFTRA. Comparing and contrasting the guidelines of SAG-AFTRA and their international counterparts offers a rubric which can be used to evaluate the safety or lack thereof for each of the scenes discussed.

Additionally, the time frame of this study is very specific and important because not only have all of these films been produced in that span of time but during that time frame they have also drawn greater attention to these countries national film industries. With the critical and commercial success of the four foreign films came an elevation of those national film industries on the world stage with far greater exposure for many of the cast and crew associated with them. I intend to show that greater exposure and recognition serves to justify the brutality on display for those filmmakers and actors. In this study, I collected data through interviews with several

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<sup>30</sup> *The Bourne Ultimatum*, Film, directed by Paul Greengrass (2007; Los Angeles: Universal Pictures, 2007), Blu-Ray.

<sup>31</sup> *John Wick*, Film, directed by Chad Stahelski and David Leitch (2014; Los Angeles: Summit Entertainment, 2014), Blu-Ray.

professional colleagues and stunt professionals to create an understanding of existing safety and stunt regulations in an effort to show how the films from Indonesia and Thailand have willfully disregarded these at times in an effort to capture exceedingly dangerous stunts for the purpose of creating ambitious and astonishing scenes.

I also analyzed promotional “behind the scenes” videos and commentary found in the home video releases of each film to understand the intentions of these storytellers as they contribute inventive and unique actions scenes to the martial arts genre. By looking at the words and actions of each filmmaker, I believe an understanding of their approach to safety and their artistry and the complex intersection of those two concepts emerges.

Additionally, I examine promotional posters, reviews and press releases in such trade journals as *Variety* & *The Hollywood Reporter*, as well as Indonesian and Thai press to ascertain the level of critical and commercial success which can be viewed as affirmation for the filmmaker’s intentions. I intend to use these marketing materials as well as box office returns to trace the successful elevation of the careers of the stars and directors of these films onto the global cinema stage as further justification of the dangerous stunt work undertaken. If it can be shown that the success of these films, which include dangerous and intentional stunt work, is a boon to the career of these filmmakers it can be seen as a narrow, yet logical rationale for the methods used to produce these films, regardless of human cost.

For the purpose of this study, I have chosen multiple theories and variables to define the martial arts genre. I would like to engage with these films to discuss their action along this interpretation of cost of the individual stunt performer in service of the stunt work. I believe that in tandem with the choreography, the films discussed purposefully reflect much of the imagery of martial arts action cinema from previously successful international films, in order to

familiarize audiences with their narratives for the purpose of rapid accessibility to any viewer on the planet. Whether it be *The Raid* mimicking Hollywood police action cinema from the 1980s or *Ong-Bak* and *Merantau* recreating the story arc of Bruce Lee's *The Big Boss*, this interpretation of the aesthetics, codes, and conventions of the genre is made wholly unique by the purposefully dangerous and thrilling choreography and action set-pieces previously unseen in the genre or by the films of Thailand or Indonesia.

Furthermore, through the use of Vladimir Propp's morphology of narrative functions and Carl Jung's narrative theories, I intend to analyze the way that the action beats are equal to the choreography to drive the narrative forward for each character. Aligned with the archetypes described by Carl Jung, these films, especially 'introductory films', adhere to a criteria that the filmmakers use to endear the heroes of their films to the audiences. In turn, the filmmakers use inventive, unique, and seemingly harmful choreography to engage with audiences in an effort to stand out from other films of the genre. The first marker of this pattern is that the fight choreography exists in service of the narrative structure of the film. These "action beats" serve to lead the narrative from one incident to the next sculpting the characters journey throughout the film. Quite often, the first of these action beats in a martial arts film serves as an introduction to the character's skill and proficiency in their art through some type of demonstration of physicality which is itself removed from the central conflict of the story. This allows the audience an entry into the world of the film, without understanding a single narrative beat. This is especially true in the case of 'introductory films' which showcase a previously unseen actor or particular form of martial art and must quickly establish their film as unique for fans of the genre. In several of the most successful 'introductory films' including *The Big Boss*, *Ong Bak*, and *Merantau* the choreography was not a rehash of moves displayed countless times before, but

an attempt at bringing a newer version of the old. Based on box office receipts for all three, the attempt was successful. This is key to studying the martial arts film because the genre is not localized but deterritorialized and influenced not by the language of the spoken word, but by cinema. More importantly it is influenced by the display of imagination and body in motion that collapses and yet maintains the empty frame, drawing viewers into the compound of the film through a multiple and troubling language of sensations, in service of the narrative.

The next important criteria in the the martial arts film is the hero/heroine or the main character. Again, while this may seem obvious, there are nuances to the concept of hero/heroine in this discussion. If we look at the choreography as easily translatable because of the sameness of physical movement then we must also look at characteristics from the hero that are easily deterritorialized. A key part of this is a simple narrative arc, striking a balance between the universal and the locally understandable. Conversely, many martial arts films create stories that are unique to the country of origin and because of that lack the success of the films discussed here. One can view films like *Never Back Down* (2008, d. Wadlow)<sup>32</sup> in the U.S., *Green Street Hooligans* (2005, d. Alexander)<sup>33</sup> in the U.K., or *Bangkok Knockout* (2010, d. Rittikrai)<sup>34</sup> in Thailand to see examples of productions that may have found success in their home country, but not internationally, because of such a culturally or nationally focused scope in the story.

It is in the main character of each film that we see the archetypes established by Jung as contributing to the story and character beats of each film. Not only is a simple story easily understood internationally, but an easily identifiable and recognizable character type creates an

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<sup>32</sup> *Never Back Down*, Film, directed by Jeff Wadlow (2008; Los Angeles: Summit Entertainment, 2008), Blu-Ray.

<sup>33</sup> *Green Street Hooligans*, Film, directed by Lexi Alexander (2005; London: Universal Pictures/Freestyle Releasing, 2005), DVD.

<sup>34</sup> *Bangkok Knockout*, Film, directed by Panna Rittikrai (2010; Bangkok: Baa-ram-ewe/Sahamongkol Film International, 2010), DVD.

entry point for audiences to engage with the story on display. This is crucial to an acceptance of the violence inherent to martial arts films. By offering easily recognizable character types with which international audiences can identify across cultures, the filmmakers give narrative rationale for accepting the extremely physical and seemingly authentic choreography that propels the hero forward. For filmmakers, this criteria is doubly important because in addition to offering easily acceptable character types, whether that character is a young innocent finding their strength amid the chaos of a larger urban setting or a police officer fighting off several criminals, it also establishes the visual look of that hero. This convention is not just limited to the films I have discussed here, but throughout the genre. The most successful martial arts films make the hero stand out amidst the flash of motions and situations they are thrust into, often because of what they are wearing and in some cases what they aren't wearing. Examples include Bruce Lee in his yellow jumpsuit, or displaying his lithe physique sans shirt, annihilating a room full of Japanese fighters. Or consider Tony Jaa wearing the rope binding on his arms and head, or the Kaad Chuek, Iko Uwais in his swat uniform, or Neo in his tunic in the Matrix, or Daniel-San fighting the Cobra-Kai dojo in his karate gi and headpiece. All of these films establish a look for the hero in the scenes at which the choreography is at play which makes them stand out visually, no matter where in the assemblage of action, setting, and framing they wander.

The next criteria that must be included is the final showdown at the end. This is a distinction that is important because the difference between an action movie, a dramatic movie with a fight scene, and a martial arts film is that the hero and his journey end in a face-off with the villain that is fought with hand-to-hand martial arts combat. Not only is this a summation of the easily understood concept of good vs. evil but the build-up to the fight is that *space of the possibility* that expands the time frame of the film to become the entirety of the beginning,

middle, and end of the scene. It is this moment that audiences identify and remember, a third space, because quite simply it is in that moment where the hero's journey culminates and in that space the audience waits with baited breath to finish the journey with them. Again this moment only exists in martial arts films. We can view this event in Hong Kong action cinema, which is the crux of so much of the origins of the martial arts genre; for as influential and successful as a film such as *Hard Boiled*(1992, d. Woo)<sup>35</sup> or *Infernal Affairs*(2002, d. Lau, Mak)<sup>36</sup> are, the showdown of those films is completely different from the films discussed here as they rely entirely on gunplay or narrative double-crosses to arrive at their conclusions.

The final key component to identifying a martial arts film is the *thematic codes and conventions* that are specific to the genre and expected by the audiences. I believe this to be just as crucial to the international and universal success of the martial arts film as the choreography is. In reality the escalation of any given situation into the realm of violence is terrifying. In particular, when a human being comes into physical contact with another, the result is rarely enjoyable for the actors or for observers. Similarly the celebration of the beauty of martial arts is rarely enough to make a film resonate with audiences across the world. The physical expression of martial arts without thematic connection or context is on display in Ultimate Fighting Championship(UFC) and mixed martial art(mma) matches or in “forms” competitions which simply do not have the lasting resonance of the four films which Bruce Lee starred in or Jackie Chan’s oeuvre. The idea of martial arts minus thematic sensibilities gives us another key component of the martial art film that resonates with audiences. That is the idea of the authentic or realism, which audiences equate to popular physical competitions such as UFC events. This

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<sup>35</sup> *Hard Boiled*, Film, directed by John Woo (1992; Hong Kong: Golden Princess Film Production, 2000), DVD.

<sup>36</sup> *Infernal Affairs*, Film, directed by Andy Lau and Alan Mak (2002; Hong Kong, Media Asia, 2002), DVD.

concept of the authentic allows martial arts scenes in a film to thrive thematically when contextualized by story and character beats.

When audiences engage in discourse with martial arts films they begin with the hope that the physicality on display is safe for all those involved. Based on my personal experience, there is a disconnect between the harm that a stunt professional or actor receives on set and the perception of harm that an audience member experiences in cinema. Nonetheless, this physicality can be viewed through the context of sporting events and understood as analogous to the harm inflicted from one combatant to another. For lifelong practitioners there is an understanding that serious study and consideration of their chosen “art” comprises the first of three branches of study in which one can engage with martial arts. The first branch can be understood as martial “arts”-- representing the expression of one's mental and physical health and wellbeing through concepts and ideals associated with a particular martial art. The physical expression of each movement to the best of one's creative ability-the perfection of form-also inhabits this branch. Such markers of success for this are forementioned form competitions in Karate, Kung Fu, or Tae Kwon Do.

The next branch is martial “science” which is the application of physical tactics into the practical use based on strategic knowledge of the body. An example is in Bruce Lee's art, Jeet Kune Do, there is a set of movements known as ‘trapping’. This ‘trapping’ is expressed as the marginalization of an opponent's extremities to the advantage of the striker. For instance in *Enter the Dragon* when, in the context of competition, Bruce Lee connects his arm with his opponents and proceeds to slap their wrist away rendering their arm useless. This is considered a “trap”. The understanding and evolution of the probable physical reactions and the application of these “traps” comprises the idea of martial “science”.



Finally there is martial “combat” which encompasses the ideals of “art” and “science” as expressed clearly against another combatant to ascertain what truly works and what doesn’t. Increasingly, audiences have been presented with greater options with which to view martial “combat” in motion, such as boxing, kickboxing, and mma matches. While some may view these as barbaric and outdated modes of competition akin to “human cockfighting”<sup>37</sup>, the reality is that sporting events such as UFC fights, Muay Thai fights, boxing matches, or K-1 matches offer an insight into the intersection of martial arts and reality which is mirrored in the violence seen on screen. When a fighter in the UFC throws a spinning back roundhouse wheel kick and knocks their opponent out there is a real world consequence that can be gauged and understood in physical terms. Likewise, when one watches a martial arts film and sees the hero perform this exact same move, realism or, lack thereof, can be evident. Similarly, when a MMA or Boxing event between two athletes is broken up by a referee because one combatant can be understood to be clearly outmatched, audiences understand what a beaten and bloodied fighter looks like. Yet, in martial arts cinema, seeing the exact same motions with the exact same outcome applied to stunt performers, with actual contact and without the benefit of a referee to stop it calls into question the audience’s understanding of the safety of these professionals in the context of film history. The knowledge of how the human body reacts to physical abuse and stimuli, gained from combat sports, gives audiences an insight to the authenticity of physical violence that can be applied to martial arts films. This insight allows the viewer to judge a fight scenes authenticity, when in comparison to those in other films of the genre.

Finally, as a fan of their work and a fellow martial artist, stunt performer, and choreographer, I have immense respect for the films of the genre and the work and craftsmanship

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<sup>37</sup> Fightland Staff, “John McCain and The UFC: Together At Last!”, *Vice - Fightland*, January 29, 2014. <http://fightland.vice.com/blog/john-mccain-and-the-ufc-together-at-last>

on display in them. It is my goal and hope that this study will support a re-evaluation of the methods used in service of showcasing authenticity in service of artistry, leading to a greater understanding and appreciation of the performers, filmmakers, films, and the martial arts genre itself.

## **Thailand's Martial Arts Films: Tony Jaa and Prachya Pinkaew**

Throughout the 1990s, before the release of *Ong-Bak*, Tony Jaa would spend hours every day on his elephant farm in the province of Surin, 125 miles south of Bangkok, working with his mentor and martial arts instructor Panna Rittikrai. Jaa, born Panom Yeerum, grew up idolizing Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan films and in Rittikrai he had found a celebrated independent filmmaker and renowned martial arts instructor who would work to evolve his incredible natural skill and ability with an eye to achieving the type of spectacular authenticity in performance for which Lee and Chan were known. Jaa learned swordwork, gymnastics, and martial arts under Rittikrai and performed as a stuntman for him in the films he made. In 2003, the two would conceive of the story and choreography for a film that could show the world Jaa's skill and introduce the national martial art of Thailand, Muay Thai. From the beginning, their goal was to ground their choreography in the Muay Thai style not only because of its importance in Thai culture and history, but because they believed they could achieve something truly unique in the combination of art and artist. Through Jaa's incredible command of his physicality, the depiction of moves such as the Archa-Payong (Triple Attack), the Ban-Sien-Tossakarn (Cut the Giant's Neck), and the Phra-Ram-Yieb-Longka (King Rama Steps On The City) would appear on cinema screens looking nothing like the cinematic martial arts that had been seen before. But it wasn't until they met director Prachya Pinkaew that the three would create something truly unique in the martial arts genre.

In 2002, Pinkaew created his own production company, Baw-Ram-Ewe, to provide films and content for Sahamongkol Film International, the biggest film distribution company in Thailand. Although Pinkaew had directed two films and produced several more, all genre fare ranging from horror to science fiction, he had yet to dip into martial arts films. Inspired by the

physicality of Jaa and the work of Rittikrai, the three conceived of the film, *Ong-Bak*. Their goal was to showcase the work and authenticity of Jaa, Muay Thai, and Thai culture. With *Ong-Bak* they crafted a simple story of a rural farmer, Ting (Jaa), who must track down the stolen head of his village's Buddha statue and return it before the village falls to ruin. His search leads him to uncover a crime syndicate in Bangkok which traffics in the relics throughout south east Asia. Armed only with his skill in Muay Thai, Ting must fight to restore his village's statue, faith, and honor. This simple story set up recalls to viewers the archetype of *The Innocent* who eventually morphs into *The Hero* as Jaa must make his way to the big city armed with only his bare hands and a belief in the goodness of his fellow man. Additionally, it is his willingness to help out those in need that brings about conflict, which is masterfully rendered on-screen. When asked about the stunt work and physicality on screen, Director Pinkaew remarked, "First of all, we used old Hong Kong techniques of shooting the scene from 3 or so different angles and slowing down the footage. Secondly, we liked to show how genuine the actions of Tony were."<sup>38</sup>

*Ong-Bak* premiered as the closing night film of the Bangkok International Film Festival on January 21, 2003. In May of 2003 the film premiered at the Cannes film festival where producer/director Luc Besson and his Europacorp pictures would go on to purchase international distribution rights to the film. Europacorp distributed the film theatrically in Europe, France, Hong Kong, Italy, Mexico, Germany. In the U.S. it grossed over \$20 million dollars from an original budget of \$1 million. It was the highest grossing film in Thailand that year<sup>39</sup>. What drove this success grew out of the years that Jaa and Rittikrai spent planning back on that rural elephant farm far from the nearest metropolitan area; breathtaking stunts and

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<sup>38</sup> Prachya Pinkaew, interviewed by Andrew Leavold, "Interview with Ong-Bak Director, Prachya Pinkaew, *Rave Magazine*, August, 2005. <http://mondostumpo.blogspot.com/2007/11/interview-with-ong-bak-director-prachya.html>.

<sup>39</sup> "Ong-Bak: The Thai Warrior", *Box Office Mojo*, accessed June 14, 2017 <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=ongbak.htm>.

incredible violence in service of the choreography and the visual clarity of Jaa and the stunt team as they executed these scenes. As Tom Quinn the head of acquisitions for the pictures U.S. distributor, Magnolia Films, described the movie:

I remember seeing ('Ong Bak') for the first time with (Magnolia) president Eamon Bowles and we literally stood up in the middle of the movie and high-fived each other, It brought out the 14-year-old in both of us. We walked out and immediately made an offer. I'm not comparing Tony to Bruce Lee, but if you had the opportunity to buy Bruce Lee's first movie, wouldn't you do everything in your power to do it?<sup>40</sup>

Without an understanding of the work and achievements of the stunt team in *Ong-Bak*, the lasting impact for Tony Jaa, the Thai film industry, and martial arts cinema cannot be adequately appreciated. This fresh display of Muay Thai along with stylistic filmmaking offered audiences an appealing alternative to the rest of the conventional styles and aesthetics offered up by the martial arts genre. Certainly that begins with the art of Muay Thai itself. A collection of movements in service of combat sports, Muay Thai essentially means “The art of the eight limbs” because of the emphasis on knee and elbow strikes as well as traditional leg and hand movements. Although there are several impressive scenes in the film which showcase this, there are two standout sequences in which the art and its impact on stunt performers make lasting impressions. It is in these scenes that we can begin a discourse of the danger and risk involved in the filmmaking which also accounts for much of the film’s regard and esteem by the international audiences who turned it into a financial and critical success.

*Ong-Bak* features the use of repetitive patterns, a common convention found across the martial arts genre, particularly the necessary conventions comprising ‘introductory films’. In *Ong-Bak* the introduction of *The Hero* and his journey is comprised of a game in the opening

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<sup>40</sup> Joel Gershon, “Thai Films Get In On The Action”, *The Hollywood Reporter*, April 03, 2007 <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/thai-films-get-action-133270>.

minutes in which the main character, Ting, and all the young men from his village must scramble to the top of a 30 foot tree to retrieve a flag and make it down safely without falling. The catch is that there is only one flag at the top. The men are in a mad scramble to reach it and return to the ground to win the game. Further complicating things is that anyone can reach out and grab the closest man and attempt to throw him from the tree to remove competition, regardless of their height or distance from the ground. From the very first scene, the film seeks to astonish audiences by showcasing a dynamic action beat which also highlights the skill of Ting as he deftly maneuvers his way up the tree and avoids being tossed to the ground. All the while, a montage plays out of would-be champions brutally kicked, pulled, and pushed from the tree. In one shot, a man is kicked in the face from above and tumbles 15 feet through the base of the branches and lands face first onto the ground below. In another, a man's pants are pulled down, revealing his bare bottom. As he reaches to pull them up, he loses his grip on the tree and falls, smashing to the ground directly in front of the lens. In yet another beat, a man is thrown off and falls on his back onto a branch which propels him chest first onto a lower branch which then shoves him back first onto the ground 10 feet below him. All of these falls are captured in wide framing, eliminating the possibility of the use of mats and wire rigs, given the proximity of the tree to the performer and camera. And each fall is repeated through multiple takes. Yet, even though there is immense physical carnage being shown, the artistry on display is impressive as the action is captured clearly and cleanly through the use of jib movements. These are timed perfectly to move up past a performer as they tumble down, reaching the end of the camera movement just as the stunt person hits the ground. This shot composition allows for an unexpected gracefulness, indicative of the skill and work of the filmmakers in planning,

rehearsing, and executing such stunts. This intent and thoughtfulness is also present in the introduction of Ting himself.

*Ong-Bak* was not Tony Jaa's first film, as he had worked for years as a stunt professional. However it was his first starring role and was conceived as a vehicle for him to showcase his skill. The first indication of this for audiences is not just his victory in the game, but his literal emergence above the pack of fellow participants. To emphasize this, all of the men in the game are covered in a white chalk, which has the dual benefit of appearing as a local custom and providing a visual indication of impact, cleverly co-opting an old Hong Kong cinema technique of emphasizing the impact of hands and bodies using chalk dust, as seen in everything from Jackie Chan's *Drunken Master* (1984, d. Woo-Ping)<sup>41</sup> to *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000, d. Lee)<sup>42</sup>. In creating a mass of unknown faces and bodies which all look the same, Pinkaew ingeniously creates true tension and confusion as to who will win the game, while allowing Jaa's skill and physicality to emerge to audiences eyes organically.

All the while the filmmakers demonstrate a willingness to stand out in the Martial Arts genre by showcasing physically impressive stunt work which looks hyper-realistic, leading audiences to associate this scene with an authenticity that will be continued throughout the film. In a 2005 interview with director Pinkaew, he explains, "It was an old Thai game from the rural area of Thailand. Usually they used a tree next to the river bank, so anyone who fell would fall in the water! But we did it on a wide open patch of ground."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *Drunken Master*, Film, directed by Yuen Woo-Ping (1978; Hong Kong: Seasonal Film Corporation, 2002,) DVD.

<sup>42</sup> *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, Film, directed by Ang Lee (2000; Hong Kong: Sony Classics, 2000), DVD.

<sup>43</sup> Prachya Pinkaew, interviewed by Andrew Leavold, "Interview with Ong-Bak Director, Prachya Pinkaew, *Rave Magazine*, August, 2005. <http://mondostumpo.blogspot.com/2007/11/interview-with-ong-bak-director-prachya.html>.

This introduction to Ting establishes his strength and skill as a martial artist, but does little to reveal his character or advance the plot. Instead, the inciting incident occurs shortly thereafter as Ting embarks on a journey thrust upon him by the village elders to retrieve the head of the town Buddha statue. His journey takes him to Bangkok where he meets his cousin, Humlae. Having rejected the modesty and relatively peaceful nature of village life, Humlae has chosen to go by the Western-name “George” and pursues wealth through quick and easy scams conning drug dealers and other street criminals. Paired with this foil, Ting’s pursuit of the Buddha head provides a way for his character to be revealed while at the same time showcasing George as a humorous partner who also does the exact opposite of Ting in several situations. This narrative device functions to endear Ting as *The Innocent*, the naive, small-town kid who will fight to stop a man from beating a woman while George is quick to turn his back or attempt to make a fast buck off the situation. The nature of Ting’s character also leads him to the first real showcase of his martial arts ability in service of the film’s narrative. While trying to ask George for help, he is tricked into fighting off a gang of low level enforcers for the syndicate who happen to be behind the stealing of his village’s Buddha head. As he is trying to escape these criminals, he runs directly into an underground fighting club run by the very same syndicate with the item he is after. Once on the radar of these criminals, Ting must fight to escape an ever-escalating series of opponents and dangerous situations. The initial confrontation propels him onto the next one and the one after that and so forth until the ending of the film.

Again we see that the filmmakers, create an ‘introductory film’ for Jaa, which must introduce a new performer or style with the archetypes of both *The Hero* and *The Innocent*. It is Ting’s willingness to help out random people on the street and in a club that endears him to the audience as his innocent nature compels him to be the only one in a building full of people to



stand up to the criminals and villains in these scenes. As in Ting's introduction scene, the filmmakers showcase a heightened level of authenticity to impress audiences with the work of Jaa and the stunt team, with the intent of creating a fresh and unique viewing experience.

There are a multitude of impressive action beats in the film which sees Ting move from one opponent to another, driving him from one narrative discovery to the next. But outside of the initial fight sequence in the underground tournament, most of the physicality on screen is Jaa and his body interacting with external inanimate objects as he flees danger. It isn't until the final action sequence, when Jaa comes to the end of his journey, that the obstacles in front him are the greatest. In the film, this is represented by Ting's infiltration of the crime syndicate headquarters, armed only with his '8 limbs' and severely outnumbered. It is in this scene that the next example of the severity of the physical expectations of stunt performers is front and center. Here we see Ting dispatch and defeat countless enemies with a staff, double sticks, tonfas (police t-sticks) and his aforementioned fists, knees, legs, and elbows. Much of the physical contact on display is no longer in service of the narrative, as Ting has arrived at the end of his quest. Rather, here we see the capitalization of his skills and the delivery on the promise of realistic action offered in the first scene.

These authentic depictions come at great physical risk to the actors. For the purposes of understanding what the danger and harm all of the actors and stuntmen underwent in this sequence, we must turn to the behind the scenes production diaries of the film, readily available on YouTube. Here we are able to view a scene breakdown of the rehearsals and the final on-set rushes of this sequence.<sup>44</sup> Analysis of these rehearsals reveals the importance of Jaa's physicality throughout the film. His unique timing, coordination, and sense of rhythm with his strikes makes

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<sup>44</sup> “องค์บาก Ongbak behind the scenes” YouTube video, 7:03, posted by “SeeingMole25”, February 08, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iVFjELtQyWM>.

the rehearsals feel as impactful to the viewer as the finished film does. Secondly, there is a sense that safety is certainly a consideration, but the designed movement, stunt, or effect of the shot is more important. Consider, a shot where Jaa removes a jacket from a foe, throws it on another, and uses a bow staff to strike that opponent in the head, knocking him unconscious. In the film this is accomplished in two shots. In the first shot, Jaa covers the opponent's head entirely with the clothing. In the second, we see the stuntman with a motorcycle helmet on his head, while the clothing which was tossed onto the actors bare face is draping the helmet. When 'action' is called, the clothing is used to conceal the helmet as Jaa uses a solid staff, made from wood to strike the actor solidly across the head and knocking him to the ground. In the behind the scenes footage, we can see the actor take a moment before he is able to rise once 'cut' is called. On a SAG-AFTRA controlled set, every attempt would have been made to substitute a wooden staff for a foam one or to shoot the scene differently to conceal the safety measures taken. Certainly, if the stunt performer or choreographer chose to use a helmet under the clothing, it would have been done. However, the use of a solid object made of wood or metal to strike another actor in the head would have been forbidden. Here, it is integral to the final shot used in the film.

*Ong-Bak* is ripe with similar scenes in which the physical impact of a kick or hit looks too real or intense to be assumed completely fake. The footage from Youtube only adds to the realism we see. In another rehearsal from this sequence, Jaa hits a stuntman on the face and inflicts a 2 inch gash above the stuntman's right eye. All the while, the stunt man appears to display the telltale signs of concussion: confusion, glassy eyed, and slow reaction to stimuli. All are physical signs that the casual viewer could associate with a real knockout or the intense hit of a fighter in a UFC or a boxing match. In the finished film, this sequence is intact, only with a

different performer taking the blow from Jaa. As eager to act as any of the other performers, Jaa takes just as much damage as any other stunt man in the film.

As Jaa, Rittikrai, and Pinkaew endeavoured to showcase Jaa's skill in the finished product, the film is replete with moments where Jaa is called upon to perform incredible physical feats. For instance, in the early chase scene Jaa outruns several thugs turns and slides backwards underneath a SUV. Moments later he somersaults between two panes of glass which are about 3 feet apart. At another point in the sequence, he jumps through a circular bundle of barb-wire. And later in the film, what may be considered his most impressive feat is achieved, although not without incredible danger. In the penultimate fight scene, Jaa finds himself at a decrepit shed and through a contrivance of events ends up fighting, while his pants are doused in gasoline. Moments later, gunfire rings out and his pants become engulfed in fire. In a standout shot in a filmography full of them, Jaa jumps, twists, and delivers a knockout kick to an approaching enemy's neck while his lower half is literally in flames. The extent of the danger inherent in this stunt is truly understood when the behind the scenes footage is viewed. In the take used in the film, both Jaa and the stunt man he kicks are drenched in fire retardant gel, albeit above the waist. Once Jaa knocks his opponent down, the director calls "cut". However, it appears as if it is a moment too late as Jaa begins running, still engulfed in flames on his lower half and screaming in pain before he realises he must fall to the ground and wait for the stunt crew, who is chasing him with blankets. As Jaa himself noted in an interview, the danger was worth it for the final film, " In one of my favourite moments I actually got burned. I really had to concentrate because

once my pants were on fire the flames spread upwards very fast and burnt my eyebrows, my eyelashes and my nose. Then we had to do a couple more takes to get it right!”<sup>45</sup>

This danger, realism, and physicality was sold, part and parcel with the action, to audiences in most of the promotional materials that emerged from the film. In the films English language trailer, an intersection of the pattern of martial arts films which *Ong-Bak* mimics is described throughout as the actions and physicality of Jaa speak for themselves. As Jaa twists, hits, and jumps from one scene to another a narrator clearly describes the film and Ting's journey:

He perfected his art, through years of sacrifice, in the place he called home. Protected by a sacred power, he lived in peace with the only family he had ever known. But now, a single act of betrayal will awaken the cruel destiny. With their future lost to fear, all that gives them hope is the courage of the man who will sacrifice all he believes to win back their greatest treasure. This season, Premiere Asia invites you to discover the action phenomenon that's taking the world by storm. - *Ong Bak!*<sup>46</sup>

All the while, shots of Jaa's many fight scenes and physical feats are shown in a montage, while pull quotes from several critics scroll by. “No Wires, CGI, or Tricks of Any Kind” -*The Guardian*, “Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and Jet Li all rolled into one!” - *Total Film*, “Wildly inventive and brutally entertaining” - *Empire Magazine*. When the film finally made it's way to DVD, the front and back covers were graced with more of the same as the back of U.S. copies read “The most exciting martial arts film to arrive from Asia in the last decade” - *Los Angeles City Beat*. And draped over the title and image of Jaa on the front of the DVD cover was “The movie we've all been waiting for since Bruce Lee” - *Variety*. This praise was not limited to

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<sup>45</sup> Erika Franklin, “Alive and Kicking: Tony Jaa Interviewed”, *Firecracker Magazine*, May 25, 2006 <https://web.archive.org/web/20060525131013/http://www.firecracker-media.com/issue06/interview0601.shtml#top>

<sup>46</sup> “Ong Bak (2003) trailer” YouTube video, 2:10, posted by “Gerball”, September 13, 2013 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nAYUv9wjV48>

American press material as a review of a Spanish poster on a DVD cover displays “Desde Bruce Lee No Se Hace Una Pelicula de Artes Marciales Son Espectacular”(Not Since Bruce Lee has there been a martial arts film so spectacular) - *Variety*. Similarly, the Brazilian DVD cover for the film had the same image of Jaa sitting with his back to the viewer with the quote “um filme para te deixar de boca aberta”(A film that will leave your jaw open.) - *The Hollywood Reporter*.

The filmmakers knew that their goal, to create an authentic portrayal of Thai martial arts and brutal realism through the stunt work, was the selling point for their film. As Jaa would note:

There were some difficult moments. I tore a ligament and sprained my ankle. That put me out for a month. But, the moves you see in *Ong-Bak* are real and hard. The stuntmen who came in had to have a lot of skill and a lot of training to be a part of it. They know the tricks to not getting hurt. It's a real hit, but it's not as hard as a definite hit. It's more like a pass. But in some scenes, just to make it look real, they had to be real fights. Sometimes the punches would really hit you, and you'd be dizzy for a bit.<sup>47</sup>

And as *Rave Magazine* summed up in a interview with director Prachya Pinkaew:

It's true that Tony Jaa might not have the on-screen charisma of Jackie Chan or current Asian superstar Stephen Chow - at this stage in his career he's still a mass of tics and his dialogue scenes have an awkward school musical feel. But when the shirt's off, there's no mistaking his command of the human body as a killing machine. It's the same with Prachya's direction. The plot and character development are clumsy, but when you get to the bare meat of the action, and thankfully that's MOST of the film's screen time, Prachya's quite considerable talents as a genre filmmaker emerge and the film goes into hyperdrive.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Erika Franklin, “Alive and Kicking: Tony Jaa Interviewed”, *Firecracker Magazine*, May 25, 2006 <https://web.archive.org/web/20060525131013/http://www.firecracker-media.com/issue06/interview0601.shtml#top>

<sup>48</sup> Prachya Pinkaew, interviewed by Andrew Leavold, “Interview with Ong-Bak Director, Prachya Pinkaew, *Rave Magazine*, August, 2005. <http://mondostumpo.blogspot.com/2007/11/interview-with-ong-bak-director-prachya.html>

With the success of *Ong-Bak* Jaa, Pinkaew, and Rittikrai were able to draw upon a greater well of resources for their follow up film, *The Protector a.k.a Tom-Yum-Goong*(2005, d. Pinkaew). The trio would attempt to broaden the scope of the work done in *Ong-Bak* in several ways including creating a new version of Muay Thai for the film, having Jaa face off against various internationally renowned martial artists and actors, setting the majority of the film in Sydney, Australia, and finally by attempting to showcase a truly unique filmmaking technique not readily seen in martial arts films.

Crucial in the three filmmakers' approach to this film was a continued emphasis on Thai culture and history. As Tony Jaa would explain, "Thailand is a Buddhist country and we try to bring spirituality to everything we do. So there needs to be a spiritual aspect to my movies and that this is reflected in the movies' themes. Hopefully this allows more people to learn more about Buddhism."<sup>49</sup> Panna Rittikrai elaborates on a behind the scenes featurette on the film's DVD: "Our director felt that normal kickboxing was not enough. He wanted something truly new. But to find the newest, we decided to look into the oldest in Thai history."<sup>50</sup> Together the two created a new form of Muay Thai, *Muay Kodchasaan*, which would showcase traditional Thai forms of kickboxing as if interpreted by another important symbol of Thailand, the elephant.

As with *Ong-Bak*, *The Protector* would center on Tony Jaa's character, Kham, as he once again quests to return his village's stolen sacred Buddhist artifacts. Unlike his previous film, Jaa would imbue his character with less timidity and a greater sense of confidence encapsulating *The Hero* archetype found in features that follow up 'introductory films' in the martial arts genre.

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<sup>49</sup> Richard Drees, "Tony Jaa Talks The Protector", *Film Buff Online*, September 12, 2006  
<http://www.filmbuffonline.com/FBOLNewsreel/wordpress/2006/09/12/tony-jaa-talks-the-protector/>

<sup>50</sup> *The Protector*, Film, directed by Prachya Pinkaew (2005; Bangkok: Baa-ram-ewe/Sahamongkol Film International, 2005), DVD.

Additionally, here we can see the first example of the broader scope attempted by the filmmakers. Whereas *Ong-Bak* revolved around stolen Buddha statues, the artifact stolen from Kham's village in this film are actually two sacred elephants, a father named Por Yai and his calf Kohn. Centering the stolen elephants in this film actually creates a deeper cultural resonance for audiences with great familiarity with Thailand, while subtly informing audiences without this cultural context.

Kham is presented as the last in a long family line of warrior guards known as *Jaturungkabart*, soldiers sworn to protect the royal elephant being ridden into battle by the Thai King. Additionally, having the stolen items be massive elephants allows for a few action sequences which are escalated with a heightened sense of realism because of the presence of the immense creatures. As Pinkaew himself would note on a behind the scenes DVD featurette, "I was quite concerned in shooting with an elephant. We had a mother and baby elephant that were actually related on set. They didn't want to be more than 10 meters apart. So the mother had to stay behind camera so she could see her baby elephant."<sup>51</sup> Yet despite this very real danger on set, the combination of culture and action would prove irresistible for the filmmakers whose ultimate goal was to ratchet up the action beats beyond what was seen in their previous film.

In fact, a pattern of escalation would seem to be the main theme of the work done by Jaa, Pinkaew, and Rittikrai in *The Protector*. A pattern seen in the many choices of the production team including the decision to make large living creatures a central part of the films narrative, shooting much of the film in Sydney instead of Thailand and bringing in many international actors to establish a globalized cast with wider international recognition. But nowhere is this escalation seen with greater aplomb than in the choreography and action beats.

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<sup>51</sup> *The Protector*, Film, directed by Prachya Pinkaew (2005; Bangkok: Baa-ram-ewe/Sahamongkol Film International, 2005), DVD

Through several standout action sequences, the trio of filmmakers elevate the work they did in *Ong-Bak* through inventive sequences involving ATV's, motorcycles, and skateboarders as well as a scene where Jaa fights off 50 attackers. Equally as impressive is a fight scene in which Jaa must battle through 3 martial artists of varied nationality, skill, and physicality including a Wushu practitioner, a Capoeirista, and a 6'11" 360 pound former WWE wrestler. All of the actors in this scene performed precise choreography on a set mocked up as a burning Buddhist temple, which has conveniently been flooded by the water released by fire suppression sprinklers. However, it is the action centerpiece of the movie that best demonstrates the theme of escalation that runs through *The Protector* as well as the physical danger undertaken by stunt performers.

In the film, while in Sydney to track down his elephants, Kham stumbles upon a restaurant that specializes in delicacies made from unique animal meats including shark fins, endangered rhinos, and of course, elephants. As this restaurant sits on the top floor of a Thai run hotel full of several other illegal activities, Kham must battle his way up the main lobby staircase through hordes of henchman to reach it. What follows is a complex and unique action scene, a four and half minute single-take which follows Jaa in through the front door and up through each altercation as he endeavours to reach the top of the 5 flights of stairs. Again, it must be emphasised that the goal of the filmmakers must be understood as escalation. Throughout much of the rest of the film's run time, greater attention is spent on the setup and execution of the action beats than on any other type of scene. As a result, it must be inferred that, from a filmmaking aspect, the goal of expanding a fight scene with slow motion shots, increased use of dolly and steadicam rigs, and increased stylistic flourishes combined with the constructed realism of the physicality delivered in *Ong-Bak* is an active attempt to draw attention to the stunt



work as envisioned by Rittikrai, performed by Jaa, and captured by Pinkaew. This 4-minute sequence is the apex of that work.

Traditional, martial arts films showcase their choreography and action through clean compositions with middle-to-wide framing in order to capture the clearest action available. The editing of these scenes is set up to convey a maximum amount of physical interaction, with the fewest cuts possible to allow the stunt crews and actors the ability to showcase their skills at their greatest physical conditioning. The single-take shot is the antithesis of this because of the degree of the planning which is required to coordinate it, the difficulty in the execution of it, and the physical blocking requirements of the actors and the production crew. Because of this, films and filmmakers which showcase single take shots well are highly regarded by critics and audiences alike as indicated by the discourse inspired by and the acclaim surrounding such well known single take shots in *GoodFellas*(1990, d. Scorsese)<sup>52</sup>, *Touch of Evil*(1958, d. Welles)<sup>53</sup>, *Paths of Glory*(1957, d. Kubrick)<sup>54</sup>, and *True Detective*(2014, d. Fukunaga)<sup>55</sup>.

The success of the sequences speaks volumes about the goals of the team behind *The Protector*. At the same time, attempting to merge such a celebrated filmmaking technique into a genre in which it is uncondusive speaks to the goals of the filmmakers for escalated audience reaction and greater exposure of their film. The scenes draws attention to a seemingly willful disregard of the safety of execution of on-screen fights in the genre; namely, the physical dangers which are mitigated by shot length, blocking, pad placement, and the intense physical requirement on the actors performing the fights. As Prachya Pinkaew himself notes on the DVD featurette, “I decided to make a 4 minute take, 4 minutes of non stop martial arts action. It was a

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<sup>52</sup> *GoodFellas*, Film, directed by Martin Scorses (1990; New York: Warner Bros. 1997), DVD.

<sup>53</sup> *Touch of Evil*, Film, directed by Orson Wells (1958; Los Angeles: Universal International, 2000 ), DVD.

<sup>54</sup> *Paths of Glory*, Film, directed by Stanley Kubrick (1957; Los Angeles: United Artists, 2006), DVD.

<sup>55</sup> *True Detective*(Season 1), Television Series, directed by Cary Fukunaga(2014; Los Angeles: HBO, 2014) Blu-Ray.

real complex set of choreography that required much of Jaa's strength as well as the endurance of the stunt team."<sup>56</sup>

From the beginning of the scene, the stunt work on display is unique in the way that every hit, step, and fall must be a coordinated effort between Jaa, the camera man, and each of the action beats 30 stunt men in the single take. Once again, the ferocity of the fighting recalls for viewers past instances of sports and violence present when two combatants collide into one another. Here, however, is the added element of constructed realism combined with the sense of literal escalation as Tony Jaa ascends the stairs, much as he did at the beginning of *Ong-Bak*. This imagery is juxtaposed with that of bodies kicked or thrown over railings to lower heights. For instance, in the fight sequence the third man to attempt to stop Jaa jumps from a set of stairs onto a table top only to have his legs kicked out and to tumble backwards onto the table and then down onto the ground. On the second floor, the twelfth stunt man Jaa encounters is picked up and dropped over the railing through a standing kiosk made entirely of wood, while the camera tracks through the entire encounter. On the third floor, over 30 feet up, the seventeenth stuntman is thrown through a wooden banister and down to the ground. Here the camera stays on Jaa, to allow for a clever use of thick mats to be rushed onto the ground below in time to catch the falling performer before being removed off set just as the camera pans over the railing, giving the illusion that this man fell to serious injury or death. All the while, many other fighters coming in contact with Jaa merely have the "normal" contact that Jaa himself described as, "just trying to make it look real... real fights."

The sequence in the film is just over 4 minutes long. To capture this, the production spent a month filming. The sequence was attempted 8 times over the course of that month, twice a day

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<sup>56</sup> *The Protector*, Film, directed by Prachya Pinkaew (2005; Bangkok: Baa-ram-ewe/Sahamongkol Film International, 2005), DVD.

on 4 separate days. Between each day, recovery was crucial as all involved including the steadicam operator were pushed to their physical limits. Director Prachya Pinkaew recalled on the featurette, “ Everyone involved was utterly exhausted. From the the degree of pre-planning to figuring how to shoot it to Jaa who had to have smelling salts between takes.” Jaa elaborates:

Everything had to be choreographed just right, because the camera only held four minutes of film. We would start the scene and I would work my way up but something or someone wouldn't be where they should and we would have to start over. Sometimes we would get almost to the end of the scene and the film would run out of the camera. We originally had a white camera operator but he wasn't fit enough to keep up with the scene so we used a Thai one instead.<sup>57</sup>

In the end, the scene is spectacular to view and yet, because of the nature of the single-take, the danger and harm for all involved is never lost on audiences.

Quite telling in this regard is the U.S. DVD commentary by noted martial arts film scholar Bey Logan who notes that the lead up and following section of the film were both shot, along with much of the rest of the film, in Sydney. However, the single take was done entirely on-set in Bangkok, which speaks to the filmmakers understanding of the difficulty of the shooting as well as the need to have the elements of safety and stunt work be under their control and not Australia's union, the Media Entertainment & Arts Alliance. As a fellow stunt performer and U.S. SAG stunt woman Shawna West noted of the scene:

I thought that was amazing. Because I know what it takes to do single shots. It was impressive to watch. They were creative and I loved their use of props, the skill was outstanding, it was just action packed and non stop. I felt like my heart rate was speeding up along with the action in the film and it was fun to watch. What I didn't like was watching these people obviously getting very hurt when there was high falls. I think the most dangerous thing about that scene is how far they were willing to go to get the shot.

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<sup>57</sup> Richard Drees, “Tony Jaa Talks The Protector”, *Film Buff Online*, September 12, 2006, <http://www.filmbuffonline.com/FBOLNewsreel/wordpress/2006/09/12/tony-jaa-talks-the-protector/>.

And how I felt like there was very little regard for safety. I mean it was obvious. Like I said, I knew when someone was hitting the ground from 20ft up and they had no protection. You can see when someone has pads. There were no pads on those people.<sup>58</sup>

Bey Logan also acknowledged that escalation was indeed a key intention, “Prachya Pinkaew would say we’ve got the stunts as good as they can get, we’ve got the action pieces as good as they can get. How do we actually take things to the next level?”<sup>59</sup> Unbeknownst to Pinkaew, Jaa, and Rittikrai during production, the international attention garnered by their previous film had already brought a greater interest in collaboration and business contracts from around the globe. Distribution rights outside of Asia were quickly snapped up upon completion of the film’s shoot by many companies internationally and by The Weinstein Company in the U.S. The Weinstein’s would make several suggestions to the final version released on U.S. screens including attaching several prominent names in film and music in the hopes of appealing to as wide an audience as possible and broadening the scope of audiences outside of die hard martial arts fans drawn by Jaa’s work in *Ong-Bak*. This included advertising the film under the “Quentin Tarantino Presents” label which had also been applied to martial arts epics such as *Hero*(2002, d. Yimou)<sup>60</sup> and the classic *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin*(1978, d. Chia-Liang)<sup>61</sup>. Perhaps just as important was the recruiting of Hip Hop legend The RZA of the Wu-Tang Clan to redo the score for Western audiences. Tony Jaa himself would note of RZA’s involvement on the DVD featurette, “Actually it’s a very good thing that he’s writing new music for this film because I think he can introduce Thai culture to a Western audience that might never have

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<sup>58</sup> Shawna West (SAG-AFTRA Stuntman), interview by Hector Gonzales, July 20, 2017, interview 2, transcript.

<sup>59</sup> *The Protector*, Film, directed by Prachya Pinkaew (2005; Bangkok: Baa-ram-ewe/Sahamongkol Film International, 2005), DVD.

<sup>60</sup> *Hero*, Film, directed by Zhang Yimou (2002; Hong Kong: Miramax Films, 2002), DVD.

<sup>61</sup> *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin*, Film, directed by Liu Chia-Liang (1978; Hong Kong: Shaw Bros, 2007), DVD.

known about it.” As with *Ong-Bak* all of the promotional materials throughout its theatrical run and through its DVD release would emphasize the action and stunt work front and center. Images of Tony Jaa jumping and kicking various villains would adorn posters and DVD covers with bold quotes including, “The Best All Out Action Film So Far This Year! - The Gazette.

The attempt to broaden the scope of the action, filmmaking and stunts and the advertising would prove to be wildly successful. By the end of 2005, *The Protector* would gross \$27 million dollars worldwide from a \$5 million budget. It continues to top the list as the most successful Thai film released in the United States<sup>62</sup>. From the success of both films Jaa would go on to international stardom first directing *Ong-Bak 2* (2008, d. Jaa) and eventually coming to Hollywood to star in several successful film franchises including the *The Fast & Furious* and Vin Diesel’s *XXX* films. Prachya Pinkaew elected to remain in Thailand to become one of the most successful directors in the country, launching the career of Jeeja Yanin, dubbed the female Tony Jaa, through much of the same filmmaking techniques and showcases of physicality that led to Jaa’s stardom. Panna Rittikrai passed away in 2014 after many successful collaborations with both Pinkaew and Jaa in his directorial efforts. Both Jaa and Pinkaew continue to be prolific in both Thai and U.S. martial arts cinema. The impact of their first two films together remains impressive for their willingness to showcase extreme physicality in order to draw greater attention to their work. Ultimately they would demonstrate a pattern of work through their first two films that would lead Hollywood to attempt to mimic their films. In the end, their work could only truly be matched by the rise of Indonesian Martial Arts Cinema a few short years later. It was a pattern that Indonesian filmmakers would use to great effect in order to establish their work as the “next big thing” in the genre.

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<sup>62</sup> “The Protector”, *Box Office Mojo*, accessed June 14, 2017, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=protector.htm>.

## Indonesia Bursts Forth Onto the scene: Iko Uwais and Gareth Hsu Evans

In the late 2000's, a singular martial arts actor emerged as a major force in driving international cinematic audiences to the box office in ways previously seen only by Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and Jet Li: Donnie Yen. Born in Hong Kong and raised in Boston, Donnie Yen has been hailed as the continuation of the cinematic legacy that Bruce Lee began and Jackie Chan evolved. In a review of one of his 2011 film's *Birth Movies Death* noted, "The most amazing special effect in any Donnie Yen movie will always be Donnie Yen. Despite closing in on 50 Yen can easily pass for a man in his 20s, and that's with his shirt ON - when the shirt comes off, forget about it. The guy looks like an immortal."<sup>63</sup>

Yen finished 2016 with a new release in his hit international *Ip Man* franchise as well as becoming the first Hong Kong actor to be featured prominently in a *Star Wars* film. That film, *Rogue One* (2016, d. Edwards)<sup>64</sup> was the franchise's first spin off, in which he had an entire fight scene that he choreographed, serving as the franchise's first martial arts fight sequence. For Yen, 2016 was the culmination of years of hard work fighting on screen, and interestingly, it occurred after he was driven to step up his presence and screen fighting in the wake of Tony Jaa's ascendance in international martial arts cinema. As Todd Brown of Screen Anarchy noted in an editorial, "Jaa's big debut was a massive success in Thailand and around the globe, Hong Kong screen fighter and choreographer Donnie Yen openly stated that Jaa had beaten Hong Kong at their own game. Yen would acknowledge using *Ong-Bak* as a motivating force to do better in his own work, a move that led to the peak output in Yen's lengthy career."<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Devin Faraci, "Review: Ip Man 2 - Legend of the Grandmaster", *Birth Movies Death*, January 27, 2011. <http://birthmoviesdeath.com/2011/01/27/review-ip-man-2-legend-of-the-grandmaster>.

<sup>64</sup> *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*, Film, directed by Gareth Edwards (2016; Los Angeles: Disney, 2016), Blu-Ray.

<sup>65</sup> Todd Brown, "The Rise and Fall of Tony Jaa", *Screen Anarchy*, January 12, 2011. <http://screenanarchy.com/2011/01/the-rise-and-fall-of-tony-jaa.html>.

Yen was not the only martial artist or filmmaker motivated by the team of Jaa, Pinkaew, and Rittikrai. Hollywood attempted to lure Jaa onto its shores but, in the end it would be several years before he would join a U.S. production. In the meantime, films in the martial arts genre were produced and distributed to varying degrees of success. However, no single film or filmmaking team would capture the eye of international audiences in quite the same way as *Ong-Bak* and *The Protector* did. It wasn't until 2012 that a martial arts film would draw such unexpected audiences nor be as successful at launching the careers of its filmmaking team to international acclaim. However, before that film, *The Raid*, would storm film festivals and box offices around the world, the team behind it first worked on a film which was born out of and ascribed to much of the same patterns of exposure and authenticity as *Ong-Bak*, *Merantau*.

The team behind both *Merantau* and *The Raid* consisted of stars and choreographers Iko Uwais & Yayan Ruhian, Producer Asio Sagantoro, and writer/director Gareth Evans. Curiously, for a director of films that were so firmly rooted in Indonesian culture, martial arts, imagery, and language, Evans is not Indonesian, but is in fact Welsh. A slow filmmaking career in Britain combined with a 2006 marriage to his Indonesian wife, Maya Barrack-Evans, led Evans to relocate to Jakarta in 2007. While working as a freelance director, Evans was hired by renowned Indonesian actress and activist, Christine Hakim, to direct one episode of a 5 part series on the cultural heritage of Indonesia, *Land of Moving Shadows: The Mystic Arts of Indonesia - Pencak Silat* (2007, d. Evans)<sup>66</sup>. Pencak Silat is, much like Muay Thai in Thailand, the national martial art of Indonesia. Consisting of several arm and wrist locks, punches, kicks, and greater fluidity in movement, Silat is every bit as important for Indonesian culture and identity as Karate is to Japan, Wing Chun to China, or Capoeira to Brazil. While working on this documentary he met

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<sup>66</sup> *Land of Moving Shadows: The Mystic Arts of Indonesia-Pencak Silat*, Film, directed by Gareth Evans (2007; Jakarta).

many future collaborators including Sagantoro, Ruhian, and most importantly Iko Uwais, who at that point was working as a delivery driver for a phone company in Jakarta. With his star and choreographers aboard the team, Evans began crafting a film around Uwais that would look to *Ong-Bak* as an example of how to showcase the cultural heritage of Indonesia and also serve as a template for capturing realistic and unique martial arts in action. As Evans himself would note in a featurette on the *Merantau* DVD, “Basically, what we are hoping for this film is to have the same effect for Silat that *Ong-Bak* did for Muay Thai. That people in the west start to recognize this art and appreciate it. Hopefully maybe kids all over the world see the movie and start to want to learn Silat.”<sup>67</sup> Producer Asio Sagantoro would elaborate on the same featurette, “Hong Kong has Jackie Chan and the legend of Bruce Lee, Thailand has *Ong-Bak* and Tony Jaa. We have nothing and no one. What made me want to join this project with Gareth is despite him not being Indonesian, he wants to catch that moment to give us a martial arts hero, and to showcase Pencak Silat.”

Together Evans and his team created a film which also featured a humble hero, “Yuda”, portrayed by Uwais, who must leave his rural home to confront the big city and in doing so, finds himself in increasingly dangerous situations where the only thing that saves him is his incredible skill as a practitioner of Silat. However, unlike *Ong-Bak*, Yuda’s journey away from home is not to right a wrong done to his people, but instead a right of passage that is quintessential to Indonesian society. In *Merantau*, Yuda belongs to the Minangkabau people which hail from Western Sumatra. The Minangkabau people are the largest remaining matrilineal society in the world, meaning the flow of property, family name, and land passes down from mother to daughter. Because of this, many young men leave home to seek their own fortunes on a ‘journey of self discovery’. This journey is known as “Merantau” and one of the many things that the

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<sup>67</sup> *Merantau*, Film, Directed by Gareth Evans (2009; Jakarta: PT. Merantau Films, 2009), DVD.



young Minangkabau men learn before they leave home is Pencak Silat.<sup>68</sup> From the very beginning of the film Evans and company establish Yuda as a strong, loyal, humble son in pursuit of an ultimate ideal of Indonesian culture armed with his people's greatest physical skills all before Yuda ever leaves home in the first act. And just as with *Ong-Bak*, Yuda's pursuit of merantau armed only with Silat in a hostile, modernized city leads him from action beat to action beat as he stumbles upon a human trafficking ring and chooses to help innocents who cannot help themselves. Also echoing the tone of *Ong-Bak*, realism and authenticity would be the most important selling point for Evans and Uwais when it came to the choreography.

In this case, as an 'introductory film', Uwais' character begins the film with a simple demonstration of his skills set against an expansive cliff face as the concept of merantau is described by a voiceover as the credits roll. A few moments later, Yuda is shown in his last sparring session with his Silat master. After a few quick exchanges, Yuda's master stops him as he prepares to strike. Immediately, Yuda bends his knee and takes his masters hand in thanks, having gained his blessing. Within these first 10 minutes, Evans establishes Yuda as an ideal son and student as well as an adept martial artist. Interestingly, neither display of skill is overly violent, symbolizing that this martial arts hero is at once both supremely in command of his physicality and able to cease fighting at a moment's notice in pursuit of peace. The opening of *Merantau* stands in stark contrast to *Ong-Bak's* opening sequence suggesting a more thoughtful and reluctant hero.

After the opening, the realistic violence in the action beats intensify. Throughout the narrative, as Yuda confronts situations where new friends are endangered by a criminal underworld operating in Jakarta, his skill is demonstrated time and again with the violence

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<sup>68</sup> Wikipedia contributors, "Minangkabau people," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, November 20, 2017. [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Minangkabau\\_people&oldid=810615265](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Minangkabau_people&oldid=810615265).

shown increasing in intensity with inherently greater risk for the performers. Take for instance a sequence in the middle of the film where Yuda must protect his new friend, Astri, and her younger brother who have been trapped by four henchmen on a pedestrian bridge overlooking a busy street. Yuda uses a metal pipe to take on all four in an impressive display of choreography. None of the blows between performers are as believable as those in *Ong-Bak* or *The Protector*, yet because of the setting of the bridge, the scene never risks losing authenticity. The way the henchmen bounce off the ground or bridge and fall off as cars race below in the same frame recalls scenes in Jaa's films in which bodies are thrown about in much the same manner. In a later scene Yuda, chased by more henchmen on a rooftop maneuvers down a scaffolding while fighting them off, landing in an alleyway where he is attacked by a thug on a motorcycle. Here, instead of kneeling the driver in the head, as Jaa did, Yuda outruns him until he is able to fashion a clever makeshift clothesline that pulls the rider off shooting him across the ground. In this scene, it is the repeated knocking off of the rider and the shots in which Yuda must outrun and be pushed or hit by the motorcycle that creates the biggest danger for the stunt team.

In fact, for *Merantau*, the locations pose more danger for the stunt team than the movements executed by the actors. For instance, in the final fight sequence of the film Yuda attempts to free Astri and several women caught in a sex trafficking ring. The scene is set at a shipping container site in the harbor where the women are held. As Yuda battles from one set of thugs to the other he does so on the top of several 10ft tall metal containers. He throws many of the thugs off the container as the camera tracks their falls. Yuda kicks a select few as they attempt to jump from another container to the one he is on. The stunt actors fall short of the top and land chest-first or face-first on the edge of the container before falling to the ground below. Much of this is done in single shots which once again recalls into audiences minds the danger

and risk of shots which seem so realistic. There is a inevitable level of harm that cannot be mitigated by pads and wires when entire action beats are shown in a single shot. Evans and his producer, Asio Sagantoro realise the demands placed on their stunt team and Uwais:

Conditions were pretty tough yet we were supported by a solid crew who were committed. We worked beyond normal hours. Iko has the biggest responsibility of the film since he appears in almost every scene. We tried to accommodate him so that he could perform a fight sequence, then rest then shoot a dramatic sequence. We gave him time to recover and be in prime condition. But Even with the mat, it really hurts falling like that on your back, even using a mattress<sup>69</sup>

Yet for the all involved, this showcase of Silat and authenticity was non-negotiable. At the same time the goal for the filmmakers was to an appropriation of the style and success of *Ong-Bak* in hopes of presenting Indonesian culture and art to the world. In an interview, Sagantoro and Christine Hakim remark:

Merantau is the first martial arts film in Indonesia in 15 years. We are not only giving dimension to the Indonesian film industry, also promoting Indonesian martial arts. Before Merantau, most martial arts movies were not using Silat. They used techniques from Thailand, China, Hong Kong, or Japan. That's what makes me interested in it. Merantau uses the Indonesian traditional art of Silat.<sup>70</sup>

Just as with *Ong-Bak*, the desire by the filmmakers to showcase authenticity, realism, cultural heritage set in the framework of a traditional martial arts film would prove incredibly successful.

*Merantau* premiered at the Puchon International Fantastic Film Festival in South Korea on July 23rd, 2009 before being released theatrically in Indonesia that following August. The film also screened at the 1st annual Action On Film festival in Asheville, North Carolina winning

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<sup>69</sup> *Merantau*, Film, Directed by Gareth Evans (2009; Jakarta: PT. Merantau Films, 2009), DVD.

<sup>70</sup> *Merantau*, Film, Directed by Gareth Evans (2009; Jakarta: PT. Merantau Films, 2009), DVD.

the jury award for best film. It was acquired by Magnolia Home Entertainment for U.S. distribution on home video. The film grossed over \$9 million internationally on a \$1.1 million dollar budget.<sup>71</sup> The gross and distribution strategy suggests that Magnolia Home Entertainment earned relatively modest returns on their investment. However, the film was a critical success, earning strong reviews which were used to market the film on the film's posters and DVD/Blu ray releases. For example, *Variety* wrote, "Announcing itself as the first Indonesian martial-arts in 15 years, "Merantau" introduces a potential star in 26-year-old Iko Uwais. A kind of softer, more metrosexual version of Thailand's Tony Jaa, Uwais has the moves and looks to carve a career beyond the archipelago."<sup>72</sup>

Once again, the choice of what quotes and imagery from the film used in the marketing demonstrates a clear understanding that the action, violence, and authenticity of the film was its main selling point. *Merantau's* official trailer revealed remarkable shots of action and violence, intercut with a text that read, "In 2009 Asia's newest action hero Iko Uwais will introduce to the world a new breed of action. This. is. Silat."<sup>73</sup> The claim that the film introduces the world to a new breed of action, as well as Asia's newest action hero, recalls the voice-over of the first trailer for *Ong-Bak*, "This season, Premiere Asia invites you to discover the action phenomenon that's taking the world by storm." Both trailers seek to make a connection in the minds of potential audiences by asserting their respective films offer realistic violence and authentic martial arts moves that were previously unknown to a majority of Western viewers. The trailers frame the films as a unique international phenomena that the viewer risks missing out on. The

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<sup>71</sup> "Merantau", *Numbers*, accessed October 17, 2017. <http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/production-company/Merantau-Films>.

<sup>72</sup> Derek Elley, "Merantau", *Variety*, November 8, 2009. <http://variety.com/2009/film/reviews/merantau-1200477521/>.

<sup>73</sup> "Merantau Trailer(HD)", YouTube video, 2:47, posted by "Merantaufilms", May 2, 2009, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QfH\\_H7SUv28](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QfH_H7SUv28)

print ads after the film began premiering at festivals furthers this strategy, "Mind-exploding action sequences coupled with genuine emotional impact." - *Film School Rejects*. "The next great martial arts film to come out and one of the best this past decade one that serves very loud notice that Indonesia is back in the action game." - *Twitchfilm*. Most telling for the self professed hopes of Evans and his team would be a quote in a review from *Screenanarchy*:

Boasting very strong technical values, a deceptively simple story that packs an emotional punch, and universally strong performances from a cast blending experienced actors with those making their screen debuts *Merantau* serves very loud notice that Indonesia is back in the action game, riding on the back of their first legitimate martial arts star since Barry Prima.<sup>74</sup>

Perhaps the greatest impact of *Merantau* was precisely that, notice for action cinema fans that a new filmmaking team with a new martial arts style had arrived. This filmmaking team took several of the lessons of authenticity and realism seen in the films of Tony Jaa and married them with greater storytelling sensibilities. And if the box office revenue of *Merantau* can be seen as meager with respect to other martial arts films, then that notice to the world of action cinema would seem to be all the more valuable as Evans and his team prepared for their next feature, *The Raid*.

The theme of Panna Rittikrai and Tony Jaa's second feature and collaboration was escalation and while Gareth Evans and his team looked to *Ong-Bak* for inspiration while crafting *Merantau* they had something completely different in mind for their follow up. Certainly a sense of escalation is found throughout *The Raid* when compared to *Merantau*, but in almost every conceivable way *The Raid* seeks to create a unique film that transcends the martial arts genre by widening the scope of the action and the manner of the storytelling on display. In the film Iko

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<sup>74</sup> Todd Brown, "Fantastic Fest 09: MERANTAU Review", *Screen Anarchy*, September 25, 2009. <http://screenanarchy.com/2009/09/pifan-09-review-merantau.html>.

Uwais once again stars portraying a police officer, Rama. Along with a squad of 19 other elite special forces officers, Rama is tasked with arresting a local drug kingpin. To do this, the team must infiltrate a 30 story tenement building which serves as a respite for local thugs, drug dealers, thieves, and other assorted criminals. The team is tasked to silently enter the building in early morning hours in hopes of arresting and removing the kingpin before he can call on the buildings tenants for help. But when a child sentry spoils the team's entry, the police find themselves in a fight for survival. The kingpin has not only alerted the entire building to the team's presence, but also publicly broadcasted on the intercom that anyone who kills a police officer will be able to live in the building for the rest of their life, rent free. What follows is a relentlessly paced action/martial arts hybrid that leans heavily into genres other than the martial arts film.

With this cross-genre story, Evans brilliantly opens up the world of the film beyond a simple martial arts narrative. By centering a group of police officers trying to stay alive as the “good guys” and having Rama serve as the central protagonist who simply wants to get back home to his pregnant wife, Evans solves the moral dilemma of martial arts cinema which requires audiences to engage with and enjoy the physical destruction of one person by another. By making the heroes a fully armed tactical unit, Evans enables gunplay as a part of the stunt and action work. By creating an action/martial arts hybrid that evokes traditional action cinema, akin to U.S. films such as *Assault on Precinct 13*(1976, d. Carpenter)<sup>75</sup> and *Die Hard*(1988, d. McTiernan)<sup>76</sup>, Evans is able to engage audiences unfamiliar with traditional Indonesian or martial arts films. Gone are the culturally specific flourishes, or the necessary explanations of context for international audiences watching the film. What remains is an action narrative that

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<sup>75</sup> *Assault on Precinct 13*, Film, directed by John Carpenter (1976; Los Angeles: Turtle Releasing, 1997), DVD.

<sup>76</sup> *Die Hard*, Film, directed by John McTiernan (1988; Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2013), Blu-ray.

can be understood by almost anyone as simply the good guys versus the bad guys. And by using Uwais, Ruhian and his previous team, he is ensuring that audiences who found much to love in *Merantau* will be thrilled by the eventual shifting of the film from a traditional action film into a flat out martial arts movie halfway through its runtime. As Evans himself points out in his commentary for the film:

For *The Raid* I wanted to approach it differently than *Merantau*...with that film it kind of took us a long time to sort of get us to the action. We dwelled a lot on setting up the drama and tradition of the culture. The way it was structured, we didn't end up getting to the first fight for about 45 minutes in. With this I wanted to have a streamlined introduction and get right to the action and have this relentless pace where we do a lot more things with the look and feel of the film. For instance in this film the lighting is a lot more atmospheric than it was in *Merantau*. For this movie we were going for a sort of noir-ish look.<sup>77</sup>

The result is a film that is tonally different than many other martial arts films including *Ong-Bak*, *The Protector*, or *Merantau*. At the same time the stunt work and choreography is much more brutal in tone and fashion because the police officers are in a literal fight for their survival against a horde of criminals armed with guns, machetes, and knives. Not only are there exhaustive fist fights throughout, there are entire scenes comprised solely of gunplay and explosions in the first half of the film that the stunt team approaches with the same creativity as they do the fights. For example, after Rama and his team find themselves trapped in a corner apartment by the tenants of the building, they must shoot, hack, and force their way through one floor and down into the apartment below them while fighting off thugs who are trying to get in through the door of both apartments. Because of this, the stunt work and choreography are incredibly meticulous and dangerous. While the filmmakers insist that they attempted to mitigate

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<sup>77</sup> *The Raid: Redemption*, Film, Directed by Gareth Evans (2012; Jakarta: PT. Merantau Films, 2012), Blu-ray.

the danger of the stunts, what is seen remains startling to the viewer. In one section Rama is out-running a gang of criminals armed with machetes. As he reaches the buildings internal atrium he confronts one of the gang members, fights him, and tosses him over the railing. The gang member falls down one flight of stairs and lands directly on his back on the railing of the stairs. This scene appears as a single take, and the result is both impressive and terrifying. But, Evans explains it was actually a cleverly edited take of three shots in one, yet the danger of the stunt remained:

We actually lifted the stunt guy up on a wire, one meter up and dropped him down with 3 different shots and stitch them together. Where it went wrong is when we did that first take of it the guys pulling the wire pulled too hard. So instead of him going out on an arc and coming down it threw him across the way and smashed the back of his head into the wall. Then the guys with the wire lost their balance and dropped him and he ended up falling and missing the crash mats and hitting the ground down below, a 5 meter drop(16 feet). Everyone on the crew their heart was in their mouths and we were all freaking out. We sort of thought something terrible had happened to him. And when the paramedics came into check him they said he came to and was like going on with the same kind of stunt guy attitude of “let’s go again. I can take this pain I can take this type of punishment.” We kind of told him ‘no take a break, take 4 days off and then come back to us’. And he did and he came back and he nailed the shot.<sup>78</sup>

Elsewhere in the film Rama must fight multiple people on several occasions to both survive in the narrative and to move from action beat to action beat in a manner that feels organic to the story. Choreographer and actor Yayan Ruhian would note on a video blog:

Each fight had to look different from the other. Each had to have a sense of urgency. Iko couldn’t be seen waiting for the next attacker to come, they had to come all at once. Whether it is a few opponents or as many as 18 no one was allowed to sit and

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<sup>78</sup> *The Raid: Redemption*, Film, Directed by Gareth Evans (2012; Jakarta: PT. Merantau Films, 2012), Blu-ray.



wait in the background. The camera movement wouldn't allow us to get away with such tricks so we developed fighting techniques that would be direct and brutal.<sup>79</sup>

The results are incredibly impressive and yet leave the viewer questioning the safety of the performers and that too was by design. As Evans would note on another featurette on the DVD:

I wanted it to feel like you know when you watch a real fight in a bar it doesn't end until somebody's on the ground, until somebody is out cold on the floor. And that's what we wanted to do with this one and of course it's all exaggerated because no one can take this kind of punishment and last as long as it does but we tried to keep it grounded in a sense of reality. We shunned the idea of too many acrobatics involved we wanted it to seem as realistic as possible. As if you knew this martial art style and trained enough in it you could do this too. So when we design these fight scenes we have to be able to have different elements from the art department like certain parts of the location that need to be protective for the stunt guys like walls or light fixtures. So for the shot where Rama rapidly slams the guys head into the wall 8 or 9 times we taped a bunch of blood bags to the side of the guys head, all those tiles are made out of foam and the wood is made out of rubber. So the tiles crack, the blood squirts everywhere and it looks very realistic. But he's also still getting his head slammed into the wall a bunch.<sup>80</sup>

All of this results in a film that revels in visceral carnage and elicits gasps and cheers from the audiences. Yet the violence on display is very clearly intended to maximize the brutality of the martial arts. The fights mix the fluidity of silat with brutal stomps, punches, and kicks that seem improvised and organic in the context of the narrative. Further, when watching the film, it is clear that the choreography and stunt work is the main selling point of the film, not the violence. While that may seem contradictory, consider the fate of the child sentry who stumbles upon Rama's team at the beginning of the film. After he alerts his superiors of the team's arrival, the child sentry is shot through the neck by one of the panicked police officers. The framing of

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<sup>79</sup> *The Raid: Redemption*, Film, Directed by Gareth Evans (2012; Jakarta: PT. Merantau Films, 2012), Blu-ray.

<sup>80</sup> *The Raid: Redemption*, Film, Directed by Gareth Evans (2012; Jakarta: PT. Merantau Films, 2012), Blu-ray.

this scene is markedly different than the kills shown during fight scenes, as it happens out of focus and in the background of the shot. Evans remarks:

What I wanted to do was have this moment in there but do it in a respectful way. It's soft focus so we don't actually see the details of what happened to that kid. We hint at it. It was a more restrained way of shooting the action. As you'll see later on we have a lot less restraint when it comes with the rest of the violence. But this is one moment where I felt very strongly that we had to kind of shoot it with a little bit more respect for the audience.<sup>81</sup>

While the filmmakers sought to distinguish *The Raid* as a different experience than any of their previous efforts or the work of other martial arts cinema, they were presented with a similar set of circumstances that would help escalate the film's chances of success. Just as with *The Protector*, *The Raid* was picked up for distribution by a major distribution company, Sony Pictures Classics. Just as The RZA joined *The Protector* team to redo the score for Western audiences, so too would *The Raid*'s score be replaced by a composition by a major American music artist, Mike Shinoda of Linkin Park. Shinoda would also be joined by composer Joe Trapanese, whose scores have been featured in major Hollywood fare such as Tom Cruise's star vehicle *Oblivion* (2013, d. Kosinski)<sup>82</sup>, Disney's *Tron Legacy* (2010, d. Kosinski)<sup>83</sup>, and the Academy Award-nominated *Straight Outta Compton* (2015, d. Gray).<sup>84</sup>

Certainly, *The Raid* was unlike any film Gareth Evans and Iko Uwais had made before, but the case can also be made that its reception was unlike almost any martial arts film before as well. As the late 2000s saw genre film festivals pop up and flourish for niche communities, it

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<sup>81</sup> *The Raid: Redemption*, Film, directed by Gareth Evans (2012; Jakarta: PT. Merantau Films, 2012), Blu-ray.

<sup>82</sup> *Oblivion*, Film, directed by Joseph Kosinski (2013; Los Angeles; Universal Pictures, 2013), Blu-ray.

<sup>83</sup> *Tron: Legacy*, Film, directed by Joseph Kosinski (2010; Los Angeles, Disney, 2010), Blu-ray.

<sup>84</sup> *Straight Outta Compton*, Film, directed by F. Gary Gray (2015; Los Angeles: Universal Pictures), Blu-ray.

was no longer out of place to see martial arts films play at festivals such as Fantastic Fest, ActionFest, or Fantasy Fest. But with *The Raid* being a blend of styles, genres, and firmly entrenched in its martial arts roots it was highly unusual for it to not only screen at prestigious film festivals but compete for top awards as well. The film premiered on September 8, 2011 at the Toronto International Film Festival before going on to screen at the Sundance, SXSW, Dublin, and Sitges international film festivals. Additionally, the film won the People's Choice Award at Toronto and was nominated for best international or foreign film by several media outlets that year including the NAACP Image awards, IGN, Empire Magazine, The Australian Film Critics Association and the North Carolina Film Critics Association. Based on this reception, Sony Pictures Classics gave the film a theatrical release instead of a video one.

As with *Merantau*, *Ong-Bak*, and *The Protector*, every piece of advertisement would include some of the most hyperbolic statements of any of the martial arts films discussed in this work. At the very beginning of the trailer, the well known festival laurels appear. These festival accolades are not typically associated with marketing for martial arts films. Very quickly, Rama and his team are introduced in the trailer and title cards announce the setup. "20 elite cops, 1 ruthless crime lord, 30 floors of chaos."<sup>85</sup> Immediately after this, the score of the film kicks in and the entire last minute of footage is a highlight reel of the stunt work and choreography in the film, as grandiose quotes from critics scroll by. "From the company that brought you *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Kung Fu Hustle*" "The Best Action Movie In Decades" - Ryan Aldrich, *Twitchfilm*. "Action Movies Don't Get Much More Exciting or Inventive." - David Rooney, *The Hollywood Reporter*. "Spectacular. Incredible. Exhilarating." - Robert Koehler, *Variety*. As the title card appears, the trailer ends with the shot Evans described when we was

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<sup>85</sup> "The Raid: Redemption Trailer (HD)", YouTube video, 2:22, posted by "ScreenJunkies News", February 29, 2012. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6f6f\\_kfp1Z8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6f6f_kfp1Z8).

discussing the safety and realism in the choreography. Rama slams one bad guy's head into the wall 9 times, ensuring that audiences will know what to expect from the film.

*The Raid* was a massive success commercially and critically. The film grossed over \$10 million dollars off a \$1 million dollar budget.<sup>86</sup> Iko Uwais and Yayan Ruhian continued to see their profiles grow appearing in several international films in Hollywood, Japan, and China. They were the first Indonesian actors to appear in the *Star Wars* franchise cast in minor roles in *The Force Awakens* by director J.J. Abrams, because he was “such a big fan of *The Raid* movies and of them”.<sup>87</sup> The two reunited with Gareth Evans to make the even more successful and well received sequel, *The Raid 2 Berandal*(2014, d. Evans)<sup>88</sup>. Evans is currently shooting his first American backed film *Apostle*(2018, d. Evans)<sup>89</sup> which will be distributed by Netflix in 2018.

Despite all of the success that Evans, Uwais, Ruhian, and his team experienced with *Merantau & The Raid* and the large audiences that were attracted to the later film for its action premise, at their core the films are explicit examples of martial arts films that adhere to several storytelling tropes and techniques of the genre, relying on solid action beats to further their narratives. Furthermore, the choreography of these films has been hailed as realistic, brutal, entertaining, and breathtaking. In this regard, the difference in these Indonesian productions and their Hollywood counterparts is stark. The success of these movies depend on stunt professionals who risk their life and limb to accomplish those moves. And it would seem that this willingness to perform dangerous stunts without strict oversight and regulation is the difference for these films when contrasted with their Hollywood counterparts. When asked if U.S. studios could

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<sup>86</sup> “The Raid”, *Box Office Mojo*, accessed July 17, 2017.

<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=raid.htm>.

<sup>87</sup> “Iko Uwais and the Indonesian Heroes of Star Wars: The Force Awakens”, *BBC*, December 18, 2015.

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35131428>.

<sup>88</sup> *The Raid 2: Berandal*, Film, directed by Gareth Evans (2014; Jakarta: PT. Merantau films, 2014), Blu-ray.

<sup>89</sup> *Apostle*, Film directed by Gareth Evans (2018; Los Angeles: Pt. Merantau films/Netflix, 2018), Netflix.

capture the same type of action found in the films of Indonesia and Thailand, professional stunt man and screen fighter Josh Vinyard replied:

I think individuals (usually they are the Hollywood stuntman who film their own video for their own personal goals) are absolutely capable of capturing action like this. But as far as studio's go, at this point in time, no. I do not think that. They are set in their ways, have trouble accepting that action is a completely separate skill set of it's own, and lastly... It is a business. If making something more spectacular comes at a cost without a foreseeable increase of profits, good luck selling it to your producers! To elaborate a little bit more on the money side of it, I have seen/been a part of the pre-visualizations for the fights & action for high budget studio movies. And they are absolutely amazing and incredible. But they get hacked on the day of filming due to dozens of reasons - A disagreement with director, angles that compromise lighting, insufficient resources that fell through on the day despite being promised to be delivered, incapability of the DP, etc, etc. Every second cost hundreds of dollars. And normally the solution at the moment is to water it down, or cut it completely. That is why we see action movies done by the best of the best, and we can't help but wonder if we could have done better in our own backyard.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Josh Vinyard (SAG-AFTRA Stuntman), interview by Hector Gonzales, July 14, 2017, interview 3, transcript.

## **STRICT-ly American: The Martial Arts Films of The United States**

In this study, the action and stunt choreography of Thailand and Indonesian martial arts films demonstrates high degrees of art, physicality, authenticity, at the cost of risk to the performers. American martial arts films produced from 2003 to 2017 garnered increasing commercial success. However, it is useful to note that choosing which American films to engage with proved challenging. Specifically, finding at which point from 2003 to 2017 was there the best regarded, reviewed, and financially successful American action/martial arts films released. When those factors are considered it becomes difficult to find Hollywood films which can be regarded with the same critical and commercial esteem for their stunt work or action beats as anything in *Ong-Bak*, *The Protector*, *Merantau*, or *The Raid*.

This does not mean that major American studios gave up on making martial arts films from 2003 to 2017. To the contrary during this time period, major American studios released such films as the *Kung Fu Panda* series(2008-2016), entries into the *Rush Hour* franchise(1998-2007), *Never Back Down*, *The Forbidden Kingdom*(2008, d. Minkoff)<sup>91</sup>, and *The Bourne* franchise(2002-2016). Even though some were financially successful, none of these individual films or series generated much critical esteem and consideration of their action beats. However, although several of these films and series were financially successful none of them generated much critical esteem and consideration of their action beats. I argue that their the overall impact of American Martial Arts films on the genre is nominal at best. Consider that the *Kung Fu Panda* series is entirely computer animated. Although steeped in martial arts cinema iconography the series can be viewed as an homage to classic Shaw Brothers and Golden Harvest studio films rather than a unique fresh approach to the martial arts genre. Similarly, *The Forbidden Kingdom*

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<sup>91</sup> *The Forbidden Kingdom*, Film, directed by Rob Minkoff (2008; Hong Kong: Lionsgate, 2008), DVD.

was a joint production between Lionsgate/Weinstein Company and the Chinese based Huayi Brothers Media Group. Envisioned as a homage to traditional Chinese *Wuxia Pian* films and starring established iconic martial arts stars Jackie Chan and Jet Li, the film promoted as the first ever on-screen meeting and fight between the two. The critical and commercial results were less than impressive. The film grossed \$52 million in theatres, \$3 million less than its reported budget of \$55 million, and was lamented as a film that wouldn't be remember as much more than a "paycheck highlight for either of them."<sup>92</sup>

Given his iconic stature in martial arts films, it is perhaps unsurprising that Jackie Chan represents the majority of American-made martial arts films produced between 2003 and 2017. Chan stars in, or voices ,characters in the *Kung Fu Panda* series, *Rush Hour* series, *The Forbidden Kingdom*, the remake of *The Karate Kid*(2010, d. Zwart)<sup>93</sup>, *The Medallion*(2003, d. Chan)<sup>94</sup>, & *Shanghai Knights*(2003, d. Dobkin)<sup>95</sup>. He worked with such well known stars and directors, such as Brett Ratner, Seth Rogen, Jack Black, Chris Tucker, Will Smith, Owen Wilson, Steve Coogan, Jennifer Love Hewitt, and Arnold Schwarzenegger. Yet, all of these films come at a time in Chan's career when he admits to being much older and slower, in terms of his action output. As he noted in an interview during a press junket for *The Forbidden Kingdom*, "An action star's life is very short." Perhaps even more telling, when asked in the same junket whether he was happy with how the film turned out, Chan reflected on his entire American output, "I don't know. Every time I make American film, I just trust American directors and American writers. Myself, I would never make this kind of film. For me, those kinds of films are

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<sup>92</sup> Dennis Harvey, "The Forbidden Kingdom", *Variety*, April 10, 2008. <http://variety.com/2008/film/markets-festivals/the-forbidden-kingdom-2-1200535229/>.

<sup>93</sup> *The Karate Kid*, Film, directed by Harold Zwart (2010; Los Angeles, Sony Pictures, 2010), Blu-ray.

<sup>94</sup> *The Medallion*, Film, directed by Gordon Chan (2003; Los Angeles: TriStar Pictures, 2003), DVD.

<sup>95</sup> *Shanghai Knights*, Film, directed by David Dobkin (2003; Los Angeles: Buena Vista Pictures, 2003), DVD.

ridiculous. They don't make sense. But the American way, the American audience is more interested in this kind of movie.”<sup>96</sup>

One of the few successful franchises in U.S. action cinema during this time is the Bourne Franchise, starring Matt Damon as a trained C.I.A. assassin who, after losing his memory, must find out why he is being hunted by his former handlers. Grossing over \$1.6 Billion dollars and winning 3 Academy Awards in technical categories, the series is easily one of the most successful franchises created in Hollywood in the past 20 years in any genre. Over the course of the three original films released from 2002 to 2007, the franchise combined elements of the spy film, the action genre, and the martial arts genre. Notably, the franchise features key elements found in the most successful martial arts films including an ‘introductory film’, *The Bourne Identity* (2002, d. Liman).<sup>97</sup> While starring well known American actors, the films introduced American audiences to a martial art form that had previously been widely unseen, Filipino Kali. However, the inclusion of Kali was not a matter of national identity or culture, but rather an attempt to create a fresh look and feel for the fights. The biggest takeaway from the film was the way that audiences responded to the choreography, as expressed through the film’s unique cinematography and editing. In an otherwise glowing review for the third film Richard Corliss of *Time* magazine noted, “Director Greengrass cuts each action scene into agitated bits; but he can't let fast enough alone. Could he please explain why the camera is afflicted with Parkinson's? The film frame trembles, obscures, annoys viewers and distracts them from the content of the scene.

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<sup>96</sup> Rebecca Murray, “Jackie Chan Teams Up With Jet Li For The Forbidden Kingdom”, *Thoughtco*, April 14, 2008. <https://www.thoughtco.com/jackie-chan-jet-li-forbidden-kingdom-2430683>.

<sup>97</sup> *The Bourne Identity*, Film, directed by Doug Liman (2002; Los Angeles: Universal Pictures, 2002), DVD.



It surely interrupted my enjoyment of the movie; for a minute I wanted to give it a good spanking.”<sup>98</sup>

Perhaps this is by design, as Los Angeles-based filmmaker Mattias Stork discusses in a 3-part video essay on the changing nature of American action films. Specifically when discussing the *Bourne* films, he notes that “Chaos films are those which are shot and edited away from classical Hollywood style (purposeful, hidden editing) to those which feature sound, rapid editing, VFX, and the loss of spatial awareness. Chaos films may not offer concurrent visual information but they insist that we hear what is going on on-screen.”<sup>99</sup> But for audiences the effect was a film series remembered more for ushering in an era of shaky hand held action cinema rather than clear crisp “choreography”.

Between 2003 and 2017, there was one marginalized area of American action & martial arts cinema which featured impressive stunt work and inventive choreography. These could be seen in low budget - direct to video action films. When compared with their major studio counterparts, direct-to-action films were known for their shorter shooting schedules, in addition to their smaller budgets. Filmmakers like Isaac Florentine and John Hyams flourished in the subgenre of direct-to-video films. Their films showcase thinly-plotted, intricately choreographed, and well shot martial arts films starring renowned actors/martial artists such as Michael Jai White and Scott Adkins. They also included the resurgence of aged action star Jean-Claude Van Damme. These actors would dabble in major studio fare from time-to-time such as

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<sup>98</sup> Richard Corliss, “The Bourne Ultimatum: A Macho Fantasy,” August 2, 2007. <http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1649187,00.html>.

<sup>99</sup> Stork, Mathias “Chaos Cinema Part 1”, Vimeo video, 10:23, Posted by “Matze”, 2011. <https://vimeo.com/28016047>.

in Oscar winning films like *The Dark Knight*(2008, d. Nolan)<sup>100</sup> and *Zero Dark Thirty*(2012, d. Bigelow).<sup>101</sup> They become known for the realism and authenticity of their performances and the action beats of lesser known films such as *Undisputed 2*(2007, d. Florentine)<sup>102</sup>, *Undisputed 3: Redemption*(2010, d. Florentine)<sup>103</sup>, *Ninja 2: Shadow of a Tear*(2013, d. Florentine)<sup>104</sup>, *Universal Soldier: Day of Reckoning*(2012, d. Hyams)<sup>105</sup>, & *Blood and Bone*(2009, d. Ramsey).<sup>106</sup> As actors and directors operating in a low budget world, the majority of these films were shot outside of the U.S. in places like Bulgaria, Prague and Thailand. Scott Adkins would note interestingly, “... it’s fun to work in Thailand where *Ong-Bak* and *The Protector* were filmed. It’s a beautiful place, and the crew is very hard working. They work their socks off. I was working with the Thai crew, and they’re great, they’re fantastic. They let you kick them for real and all the rest of it.”<sup>107</sup>

For fans of the genre, America’s output or lack thereof during this time was noted, both at home and abroad. In a 2012 *Black Belt Magazine* article, “The Top 20 Martial Arts Films of All Time”, none of the entries on the list were American made.<sup>108</sup> And although that list is comprised

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<sup>100</sup> *The Dark Knight*, Film, directed by Christopher Nolan (2008; Los Angeles: Warner Bros., 2008) Blu-ray.

<sup>101</sup> *Zero Dark Thirty*, Film, directed by Kathryn Bigelow (2012; Los Angeles: Universal, 2012), Blu-ray.

<sup>102</sup> *Undisputed II: Last Man Standing*, Film, directed by Isaac Florentine (2007; Los Angeles, Millennium Films, 2007), DVD.

<sup>103</sup> *Undisputed 3: Redemption*, Film, directed by Isaac Florentine (2010; Los Angeles, Millennium Films, 2010), DVD.

<sup>104</sup> *Ninja 2: Shadow of a Tear*, Film, directed by Isaac Florentine (2013; Bangkok, Millennium Films), 2013, Blu-ray.

<sup>105</sup> *Universal Soldier: Day of Reckoning*, Film, directed by John Hyams (2012, Los Angeles, Magnet, 2012), Blu-ray.

<sup>106</sup> *Blood & Bone*, Film, directed by Ben Ramsey (2009; Los Angeles: Sony Pictures, 2009), DVD.

<sup>107</sup> Evan Saathoff, “Scott Adkins Discusses Hard Target 2 And The Greatness of Universal Soldier: Day of Reckoning”, *Birth Movies Death*, August 26, 2016. <http://birthmoviesdeath.com/2016/08/26/scott-adkins-discusses-hard-target-2-and-the-greatness-of-universal-soldier>.

<sup>108</sup> Dr. Craig D. Reid, “The Top 20 Martial Arts Films of All Time”, *Black Belt Magazine*, December 10, 2012. <http://blackbeltmag.com/daily/martial-arts-entertainment/martial-art-movies/top-20-martial-arts-films-of-all-time/>.

of mainly Chinese and Hong Kong fare, it does include films from the 1960's all the way up until the lists publication including *Ong-Bak*, with *The Raid* gaining a special mention as the reviewer compiled this list just as that film was released. A year later, the U.S. publication *Esquire* magazine published "The 10 Best American Martial Arts Movies".<sup>109</sup> Of the films on the list, only two were released during the time period discussed, meaning the majority of the "Best American Martial Arts Movies" were produced before 2003. And of those two on the list one, *Undisputed 2: Last Man Standing*, is a direct-to-video film produced by the independent studio, Millennium Films. The other, a Jet Li feature, *Unleashed*(2005, d. Leterrier)<sup>110</sup> is actually misidentified as a U.S. film. It is in fact a British-French co-production produced by Luc Besson's Europacorp, also responsible for bringing *Ong-Bak* in 2003. It could be argued that American films of the martial arts genre between 2003 -2017 seemed to lack originality, authenticity, and realism that was seen in the international genre. Instead, most of the U.S. output was comprised of sequels, remakes, actors past their prime, or in the case of direct-to-video action fare, entirely independent of studio involvement.

It was not until 2014 that a major U.S. studio release would be considered a critical and commercial success and would showcase the type fight choreography that reflected the realism and authenticity of films like *The Protector & The Raid*. Perhaps it is no surprise that the film was led by longtime stuntmen-turned-directors and Keanu Reeves, an actor who was no stranger to the type of intensive training necessary to achieve realism on screen.

In 1999, Warner Brothers Pictures produced one of the most successful and influential martial arts/action hybrid films in U.S. history, *The Matrix* (1999, d. Wachowskis)<sup>111</sup>. The

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<sup>109</sup> Nick Schager, "The 10 Best American Martial-Arts Movies", *Esquire*, December 26, 2013. <http://www.esquire.com/entertainment/movies/a26646/best-american-martial-arts-movies/>.

<sup>110</sup> *Unleashed*, Film, directed by Louis Leterrier (2005; France: Europa Corp, 2005), DVD.

<sup>111</sup> *The Matrix*, Film, directed by the Wachowski Sisters (1999; Los Angeles: Warner Bros., 1999), DVD.

various fights in *The Matrix* franchise would be choreographed by the legendary Yuen Woo-ping, one of Hong Kong's most respected and revered directors/action choreographers. Over his career, Ping worked with or discovered such well known Chinese martial arts performers as Jackie Chan, Jet Li, Michelle Yeoh, Sammo Hung, and Donnie Yen. In *The Matrix*, the lead character Neo, portrayed by Keanu Reeves, must lead humanity in a battle against a world ruled by computers and technology. The franchise was a massive success, generating over \$3 Billion dollars in revenue, winning 5 Academy Awards in numerous technical fields, and influencing countless action films afterward with such concepts as multi-genre blending stories and the camera technique, 'bullet time'.<sup>112</sup> Perhaps more importantly, the franchise also introduced Reeves to two of the most prolific U.S. stunt performers and choreographers of the last 20 years, Chad Stahelski and David Leitch.

*The Matrix* franchise wrapped up in 2003. From then until 2014, Stahelski and Leitch would go on to perform in, choreograph, or direct the stunt unit (2nd Unit) for some of the most successful U.S. action and martial arts films released during that time. Their experience and success as stunt professionals allowed them to go on to found the most successful and prominent U.S. stunt team of the previous 20 years, 87Eleven.<sup>113</sup> The success and notoriety of 87Eleven allowed Stahelski and Leitch to choreograph or perform the action for some of the most successful U.S. films during that time including *The Crow*(1995, d. Proyas)<sup>114</sup>, *Fight Club*(1999, d. Fincher)<sup>115</sup>, *300*(2006, d. Snyder)<sup>116</sup>, *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*(2005, d. Liman)<sup>117</sup>, *Tron: Legacy*,

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<sup>112</sup> Wikipedia contributors, "The Matrix (franchise)," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, accessed November 21, 2017.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=The\\_Matrix\\_\(franchise\)&oldid=810800288](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=The_Matrix_(franchise)&oldid=810800288).

<sup>113</sup> Alex French, "Stuntman Inc: The one-stop school for action-movie stars", *Men's Journal*, accessed June 12, 2017. <http://www.mensjournal.com/adventure/races-sports/stuntman-inc-the-one-stop-school-for-action-movie-stars-20140825>.

<sup>114</sup> *The Crow*, Film, directed by Alex Proyas (1995; Los Angeles: Miramax Films, 2011), Blu-ray.

<sup>115</sup> *Fight Club*, Film, directed by David Fincher (1999; Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 1999), DVD.

<sup>116</sup> *300*, Film, directed by Zack Snyder (2007; Los Angeles: Warner Bros., 2007), DVD.

*Spider Man 2* (2004, d. Raimi)<sup>118</sup>, and *The Matrix*, *Bourne*, and *Hunger Games* franchises. Such sustained experience and success in major studio films would finally lead to an opportunity to design and direct their own film in 2014, *John Wick*. For their first foray as directors they knew they wanted to again work with Keanu Reeves. In Reeves, the duo believed they had a lead actor that could accurately portray a retired assassin forced back into a life that he had walked away from. In particular Stahelski, who had doubled for Reeves 15 years earlier in the first *Matrix* film, was confident he would devote the training time and effort needed to deliver an authentic and realistic performance.

*John Wick* and its sequel *John Wick: Chapter 2* (2017, d. Stahelski)<sup>119</sup> combined top tier stunt work and action choreography along with a charismatic leading turn by Reeves. It chronicled the on-going saga of John Wick as he seeks revenge for wrongs done to him, as a matter of principle. The films showcase incredibly designed action sequences including complex car chases, extensive gun play, and cleanly shot and performed fight choreography. Stahelski and Leitch were not trying to introduce any national culture or identity but rather sought to create a unique world of their own. In this world, an entire international criminal hierarchy exists on the periphery of normal civilized society. Because of this unique world, several staples of the martial arts genre are discarded or subverted, including the clearly defined protagonist as a true hero, a singular national art on display (as Wick uses a combination of Japanese Judo and Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu), and an absence of scenes establishing Wick's proficiency as a martial artist before he fights (although it is heavily implied throughout the film by supporting characters before the first fight scene). Stahelski, Leitch, and Reeves agreed that in order to guarantee the film's success,

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<sup>117</sup> *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*, Film, directed by Doug Liman (2005; Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2005), DVD.

<sup>118</sup> *Spider-Man 2*, Film, directed by Sam Raimi (2004; New York: Columbia Pictures, 2004), DVD.

<sup>119</sup> *John Wick: Chapter 2*, Film, directed by Chad Stahelski (2017; Los Angeles: Summit Entertainment, 2017), Blu-ray.

the focus for the film would be the realism of John Wick's abilities. Stahelski elaborated on their approach:

For a great action sequence – it's all about rehearsal. I'm sure you've been to live theater, right? How much do you think those guys rehearse? Or if you go see the New York Ballet? There's no editing there – there's no hiding anything. Any little mistake you're going to see, even if the dancer is just slightly out of sync. But that's the best way to describe how to get truly great action choreography. We invested really heavy in the training of Keanu Reeves early, early, *early*. Because, at the end of the day, the action's only going to be as good as Keanu can be. We surrounded him with a crew of expert martial artists. We surrounded him with three-gun and four-gun world champions who are as proficient as you can get with a deadly weapon. Then there were a bunch of ex-service guys and ex-killers, and that rubbed off on him. He's training five hours a day, six hours a day, fighting, and putting rounds in targets. By the time he was done with four months of that, he could've competed in a jiu jitsu tournament or a judo tournament, or brought it at a three-gun shooting competition.<sup>120</sup>

Producer Basil Iwanyk added in an interview, “He carved out his entire summer to become John Wick. At least on the movies I've worked on as a producer, I've never seen a movie star give so much commitment of his time before a movie actually started. And that training has paid off because the stuff he's doing in this movie is just incredible.”<sup>121</sup>

The work done by the filmmakers were acclaimed upon the films release, with the first film grossing over \$88 million off of a \$30 million dollar budget.<sup>122</sup> With audiences engaged with the film and invested in the world of *John Wick*, the second entry grossed over \$171

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<sup>120</sup> Jacob Knight, “Interview: Chad Stahelski and Jordan Perry Talk John Wick 2 and The Nitty Gritty of Action Filmmaking”, *Birth Movies Death*, February 9, 2017, <http://birthmoviesdeath.com/2017/02/09/interview-chad-stahelski-jordan-perry-talk-john-wick-2-and-the-nitty-gritty>.

<sup>121</sup> *John Wick*, Film, directed by Chad Stahelski and David Leitch (2014, Los Angeles: Summit Entertainment, 2014), Blu-Ray.

<sup>122</sup> “John Wick”, *Box Office Mojo*, accessed June 14, 2017. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=johnwick.htm>.

million off of a \$40 million dollar budget.<sup>123</sup> Critically both films were celebrated for the simple, yet effective, storytelling and action beats. Critic Peter Debruge remarked:

Leitch & Stahelski, who served as his stunt double in “The Matrix” makes a remarkably satisfying directorial debut, delivering a clean, efficient and incredibly assured thriller with serious breakout potential. Whereas the tendency among many other helmers is to jostle the camera and cut frenetically in the misguided belief that visual confusion generates excitement, the duo understand what a thrill well-choreographed action can be when we’re actually able to make out what’s happening. Since brutally efficient action sequences are in such short supply these days, the fact that “John Wick” delivers no fewer than half a dozen more than excuses writer Kolstad’s lame-brained script.<sup>124</sup>

While the reviews and box office for the films reflected a critical and commercial appreciation, reviewers and fans alike noted the influence of martial arts films that had emerged on the screen in the decade that preceded *John Wick*, with particular attention paid to the genre-bending and mixing seen in *The Raid* franchise. Inverse Entertainment published the article, “5 Fight Scenes That Influenced the ‘John Wick’ Universe” which included the final fight scene of *The Raid*:

*John Wick* is essentially a cinematic video game. A main character must fight his way through a bad guy-filled scenario to achieve an end goal, and move on to the next level. *The Raid: Redemption* blows that framework up into making the entire movie one nonstop action scene. Despite all the harrowing build-up, that film’s final showdown stands out as a *Wick* influence for its hand-to-hand combat...Keanu Reeves's bespoke assassin didn't invent his own on-screen fighting style.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> “John Wick: Chapter 2”, *Box Office Mojo*, accessed June 14, 2017. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=johnwick2.htm>.

<sup>124</sup> Peter Debruge, “Film Review: ‘John Wick’”, *Variety*, October 16, 2014. <http://variety.com/2014/film/reviews/film-review-keanu-reeves-in-john-wick-1201331660/>.

<sup>125</sup> Sean Hutchinson, “5 Key Fight Scenes That Influenced the ‘John Wick’ Movies”, *Inverse Entertainment*, February 7, 2017. <https://www.inverse.com/article/27533-john-wick-fight-choreography-s>.

In a video essay entitled “Is *John Wick: Chapter 2* Leading An Action Film Renaissance?” film editor Ross Peacock remarked:

For me the *John Wick* films are the best example of what of the evolved style of those somewhat lost action films of yesteryear can be. Whereas sadly these days [most U.S. action] films still depend on shaky cam, over-editing, and rampant CG. *John Wick* takes a different approach. They utilize a hefty amount of prep to create some very memorable and well crafted action sequences. Taking inspiration from eastern action films that have intricate choreography and wirework... the *John Wick* films have found a balance between the old school stylings of ‘one man army’ American flicks and martial arts movies to bring something that feels new and fresh to the screen.<sup>126</sup>

No matter how successful Stahelski, Leitch, and Reeves were in creating a new American franchise rooted in martial arts action, it seems that the comparisons to and the influence of *The Raid* franchise is impossible to escape. A 2017 article released 5 years after *The Raid* surmised:

...The real legacy of *The Raid* is that it showed just how good a pure, single-minded action movie could be. It laid down a challenge, and while nobody has outdone it yet, people are at least trying. I like to imagine a movie like *John Wick* as American cinema’s attempt to answer that call. Action movies around the world have gotten a whole lot nastier and more visceral and more carefully choreographed since *The Raid*. People were paying attention, and if they weren’t, they should’ve been. After *The Raid*, the regular action-movie bullshit got a whole lot harder to swallow.<sup>127</sup>

Those comparisons may in fact be apt. As inventive and successful stunt and fight choreographers, perhaps Stahelski and Leitch were not as directly influence by *The Raid* as some may interpret. Rather, it may be because Stahelski and Leitch, much like Gareth Evans, value and understand what martial arts/action cinema can achieve, when treated as equally and

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<sup>126</sup> Ross Peacock, “Is John Wick: Chapter Two leading An Action Film Renaissance?”, YouTube video, 5:02, posted by “Rossatron” February 13, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X7MnfkZxbtA>.

<sup>127</sup> Tom Breihan, “Action Movies Don’t Come Much More Visceral, Simple, or Awesome Than *The Raid*”, *The A.V. Club*, October 20, 2017. <https://www.avclub.com/action-movies-don-t-come-much-more-visceral-simple-or-1819681034>.



considered as valuable, as other types of narrative cinematic storytelling. As Stahelski would argue:

Ultimately, every scene should have an end goal, and should be executed clearly. What most people don't realize is that action can be one of our greatest forms of storytelling, because it's human beings using their bodies to convey everything we need to know. Forget dialogue. It's primal.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Jacob Knight, "Interview: Chad Stahelski and Jordan Perry Talk John Wick 2 and The Nitty Gritty of Action Filmmaking", *Birth Movies Death*, February 9, 2017, <http://birthmoviesdeath.com/2017/02/09/interview-chad-stahelski-jordan-perry-talk-john-wick-2-and-the-nitty-gritty>.

## REGULATIONS & STUNT PERFORMER FEEDBACK

It can be assumed through analysis and review of the interviews with the filmmakers and the films discussed in this work that all of the aforementioned professionals involved in the creation and execution of martial arts cinema express appreciation for the craft of the stunt performers and awareness of the need to approach their role in each film with great care. Each filmmaking and stunt team spends long hours devising and executing the action beats with the goal of representing the realism, authenticity, and spectacle of martial arts. In spite of the unified goal of authentic representation in their films, the context of production between the filmmakers and stunt professionals in Thailand and Indonesia is widely different from the action that takes place on the sets in the United States. This difference illustrates just how impressive the achievements of the team behind the *John Wick* series are and, at the same time, also highlights the comparative danger of the stunt work in the films outside the U.S. That difference lies in the safety and stunt regulations of The Stunt Actors Guild - Association of Film-Television-Radio Artists(SAG-AFTRA) and other film industries.

With over 160,000 members SAG-AFTRA represents one of the largest labor unions in the United States and the biggest union of actors and media performance professionals in the world<sup>129</sup>. Because of this union, there are a multitude of regulations regarding every facet of the entertainment business, including contract negotiations, hourly stipulations, wage distribution, membership rules, and most recently the issue of residual payment in digital distribution. Given its responsibility to monitor such a broad range of regulations, the policies written by SAG-AFTRA are at once both clear & concise yet vague and open for interpretation. This is especially the case for policies related to safety and stunt regulations. For instance, in the union's official

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<sup>129</sup> Donna Owens, "Hollywood Hotshot David White Leads the World's Largest Entertainment Union", *NBC News*, February 26, 2017. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/hollywood-hotshot-david-white-leads-world-s-largest-entertainment-union-n725021>.

*Stunt & Safety Digest* from 2014-2017, there are over 47 subsections covering everything from wardrobe, residuals, pensions to accident reporting, contracts, dressing rooms, meal periods, background performer stunt work and working with animals, smoke, & vehicles and numerous other details. Yet, the regulations regarding something as serious as working with explosives is covered in a mere 2 paragraphs of the digest:

**Working with explosives(including squibs):** If a Performer is rigged with any type of explosive device, the performer must be permitted to consult with the stunt coordinator and a qualified special effects person (holding a powder card #1 license).

If a Background Performer is rigged with any explosive device(including squibs), that Performer must be upgraded to Principal Performer. Note that the upgraded performer may be brought back on the same project in the same role on a subsequent day as a Background Performer. - *Section 27, Pg. 22*<sup>130</sup>

It must be understood that on a set, an actor or performer would have very limited input on the design, creation, and execution of any type of explosive device executed for a film. Thus, there is a logic behind the lack of clarity in SAGs rules regarding actors, on-set stunt safety, and explosions. In this case, a person with a Powder Card #1 license, required for a pyrotechnician, would have the extensive training and knowledge of explosives necessary on set. Still, when it comes time to film, the performer is the person interacting with the environment of the explosive, as captured in camera. Although the SAG-AFTRA stunt and safety digest may seem vague on paper, in practice the regulations and safety guidelines for explosives on set are, in fact, stringent. The stunt coordinator as well as the effects technicians hold safety meetings that describe the entirety of the stunt and inform all personnel on set about the rules regarding the explosives being used. The actors or stunt performers rehearse their blocking thoroughly and

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<sup>130</sup> "SAG-AFTRA Stunt & Safety 2017 TV/Theatrical Contracts Digest" SAG-AFTRA. Accessed October 20, 2017. [https://www.sagaftra.org/files/stunt\\_safety\\_digest\\_2014.pdf](https://www.sagaftra.org/files/stunt_safety_digest_2014.pdf).

everyone is aware of the emergency protocol for any potential accident. This approach to explosives can be understood as analogous to how SAG-AFTRA regulations filter down to martial arts and action cinema. Considering that there is no section dedicated to firearm and gun safety in the digest, it is not surprising that there is nothing discussing safety or regulation of fight scenes, especially given the martial arts genres marginalized place in American cinema.

To create a greater understanding of the culture on set, regulations, and guidelines regarding fight scenes in American films, I interviewed 5 former collaborators and co-workers that I performed with on several non-union projects. All of the participants have extensive backgrounds in stunt and fight scenes and all are currently registered members of SAG-AFTRA. Additionally, taken together, their work comprises a major cross section of current American mainstream media including credits for major companies such as Adidas and Nike, and films for such studios as Marvel, Disney, Netflix, 20th Century Fox, Warner Brothers, and television networks such as NBC, ABC, and CBS. When asked the questions, “Given your understanding of SAG-AFTRA’s stunt and safety digest, what sections are applicable to martial arts fights? What is your stunt team's approach to safety in a fight scene on set?” Stunt professional Lacey Robinson, whose credits include *Revolution* and *The Gifted*, responded, “I don’t think fighting has it’s own section because it’s considered one of the more controllable, safer categories of stunts or is usually done in connection with one of the other types of stunts that are covered in the guidelines.”<sup>131</sup>

Similarly Josh Vinyard, whose resume includes stunts and fights in such films as *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*, *The Magnificent Seven*, & *Fear the Walking Dead*, expounded further:

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<sup>131</sup> Lacey Robinson (SAG-AFTRA Stuntman), interview by Hector Gonzales, July 21, 2017, interview 4, transcript.

Well, fights aren't really covered in the fine print. I think because it is an ability that actors can learn them selves (I'm thinking John Wayne style fighting), and it was not a thing that threatened someone's well being, it is probably left loose. Everyone is different though. If an actor can fight, some coordinators love it. To be able to see the actor hit someone is much more powerful than the back of his head. So for story, it is an amazing ability. Though the common sense coordinator also knows that one mistake that results in a laceration on the actor's face totally halts production...or an injury, of course. But as I mentioned, I have seen/been a part of the pre-visualizations for the fights & action for high budgeted studio movies. And they are absolutely amazing and incredible. But they get hacked on the day of filming due to dozens of reasons - A disagreement with director, angles that compromise lighting, insufficient resources that fell through on the day despite being promised to be delivered, incapability of the DP, etc, etc. Every second cost hundreds of dollars. And normally the solution at the moment is to water it down, or cut it completely.<sup>132</sup>

Certainly, the collaborative act of filming a movie is subject to all kinds of external factors including egos, weather conditions, and outside problems that consistently affect the outcome of the final product. It should be no great surprise then that fight scenes, something considered to be “visceral and primal” by film directors, critics, and audiences, would not be simple to capture on film. Yet for U.S. productions, even when the film or project in question is physically demanding or a martial arts intensive, the regulation and safety practices are not clearly defined on the set. Nor is the same attention given to capturing the action beats as their counterparts in China, Indonesia, or Thailand. As Aaron Alexander, who has worked on such projects as *Batman: The Enemy Within*, *Inhumans*, and *Scandal*, would note:

Martial Arts would usually fall under Fights but I'll tell you the truth, from talking with a coordinator 2 days ago I don't even think martial arts is even in the digest. It's a skill set for the individual stunt performer, and not many have it. I can tell you for a fact, Marvel Studios relies on Pre-Visualization ALL THE TIME. every fight scene has to be rehearsed and then shot, edited, then presented to the production team (producers, camera crew, director) so everyone is in the loop. And the pre-viz has to almost be as close to the finished product as possible minus costumes and set. This means special fx and sounds

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<sup>132</sup> Josh Vinyard (SAG-AFTRA Stuntman), interview by Hector Gonzales, July 14, 2017, interview 3, transcript.

have to be added to give those who are viewing it the closest approximation to what the stunt team will be doing day of. If the production team says they like what they see, or if they don't, they'll give notes on what needs to change and then it is up to the stunt team to FIND THE TIME allowed to fix it. But from experience, things change in the day once you get in the actual environment. It's not a bad thing, but as a martial artist adaptability needs to be one of your skill sets.<sup>133</sup>

What can be taken from this insight is an understanding that fight scenes are a concern that, while important to stunt coordinators for an overall scene or action beat, are secondary to the concerns of stunt coordinators with regards to actor safety, or the concerns of the crew and producers when it comes to the actual day of shooting.

In contrast, when we analyze and compare actors unions or safety and stunt regulation in Thailand and Indonesia, there are marked differences that filmmakers encounter when it comes to fight scenes and action beats, namely that there isn't much regulation on sets outside the U.S. In Indonesia, the actors guild is known as The Association of Indonesian Film Artists or Parfi. Parfi, as a governing body, has experienced several growing pains in simply establishing itself as a viable union, with regards to helping Indonesians filmmakers with equal and sustained representation. Currently, there are several issues which draw greater concern for Parfi including a drug scandal that cost its previous president, Gatot Brajamusti, his post, as well as the diaspora of Indonesia filmmakers and crews who shoot productions outside of the country, even when the film is still being produced as an Indonesian release. In addition, the continued exposure to the stars of *The Raid* series led the Jakarta Post to remark:

There has been growing exposure of Indonesian actors in Hollywood and elsewhere abroad recently, particularly action movie stars Iko Uwais, Joe Talsim, and

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<sup>133</sup> Aaron Alexander (SAG-AFTRA Stuntman), interview by Hector Gonzales, June 16, 2017, interview 1, transcript.

Yayan Ruhian [of *The Raid* franchise]. Their success has served to cover up the problems faced by many actors in general...As the film industry has been taken off the government's negative investment list, the government should think of the protection of the local industry and draw a clear timeline for follow up.<sup>134</sup>

In this climate and in interviews with Gareth Evans, Iko Uwais, Asia Sangaroto and others involved with the filming of *Merantau* and *The Raid* we can ascertain that although safety and health is important for all involved, when it comes to filming, the authenticity and realism is more important than on-set clashes, the lack of planning, or the budget concerns which generally rule Hollywood's approach to filming. When it comes to films like *The Raid* franchise, the filming of the martial arts scenes, can be considered the biggest concern on set.

In an analysis of Thailand's film industry, a slightly more convoluted picture emerges. First of all, there is no official labor union or guild in the country, for any actor. The Motion Picture Association of America or MPAA, has an offshoot there, the MPA Thailand, which boasts on its website that it "is the voice of one of the country's strongest and most vibrant industries – the American motion picture, home video, and television industry" but the information is generally limited to copyright law and news articles about Hollywood and Thai films currently in release. According to Robin Schroeter, a German Ex-pat, who has lived and worked as an actor in Thailand for over 12 years, the Thai film industry is unlike most others when it comes to actor's guilds. With regards to gaining a foothold in the industry, he advises aspiring actors in Thailand:

In Thailand the industry works different than in other countries. Each of the agents in Thailand has a special relationship to some production companies. Extra jobs enable you to get a glimpse at what it is like to work on set. Most likely you'll work long hours (usually a minimum of 12 hours) for a minimum wage (1500-2500 Baht). Once

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<sup>134</sup> Tertiani ZB Simanjuntak, "Actors Bargaining For More", *Jakarta Post*, November 19, 2016. <https://www.pressreader.com/indonesia/the-jakarta-post-jplus/20161119/281960312342158>.

you've done some extra jobs you're ready to work yourself up the ladder. With each step your budget, exposure and the attention you get increases. It took me 1 year of going to castings to get my first featured part. Another 6 months for my first support part and another 6 months after that for the first main. While there is a lot of gossip going on on the Facebook pages of the actors in Thailand, agents as well as some casting directors post jobs there. It is a good way of staying updated on what is going on. The biggest group is definitely the Facebook group of the Actors Association of Thailand.<sup>135</sup>

The Actors Association of Thailand, has over 24,000 members and yet the section about their organization includes this sentence, “ One note, we are not the only people that read our page, we want the outside world to see actors in Thailand as intelligent, professional and united, not as cowboys fighting, complaining, bickering etc.”<sup>136</sup> Additionally Schroeter mentions that it took him over a year to get a featured part in a film and 6 months prior to that, as an extra with long hours at minimum wage to get security with a job. In the U.S., an actor who has a single professional credit on a SAG-AFTRA production, whether on television, film, or in a commercial, is automatically invited to join the union, which guarantees benefits, hours, and pay. It seems that in Thailand the lack of an actors union is an accepted reality of employment in the Thai film industry. Given this reality and the expectations for stunt teams in the wake of the groundbreaking accomplishments of Tony Jaa, Pinkaew, and Rittikrai, the demands placed on stunt performers seem ubiquitous in Thai cinema. For these performers, the danger of authenticity in their work is an unstated, yet assumed, condition of their employment. While stunt and safety regulations on set can be viewed as important, that realism is still expected by a national industry whose driving force in action is still authentic physical violence.

Internationally, there is a governing body of film unions which, on paper, gives greater attention to fights and stunt choreography. The International Federation of Actors or FIA is a

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<sup>135</sup> Robin Schroeter, “How To Get Into the Film Industry in Thailand”, *Robin Schroeter* (blog), September 3, 2013. <http://robinschroeter.de/2013/09/03/how-to-get-into-the-acting-industry-in-thailand/>.

<sup>136</sup> Actors Association of Thailand Facebook page, accessed October 25, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/74213652103/>.



global federation of trade unions from over 60 countries including the U.S. It counts SAG-AFTRA as one of their biggest members but does not include Thailand or Indonesia. FIA's website hosts stunt and safety regulations guidelines, entitled "Act Safe!". Much of the document is similar to the content on SAG-AFTRA's digest.<sup>137</sup> It is important to note that FIA is an international entity less concerned with bureaucratic regulation of hours, rates, or regulations. Allowing national unions to handle the minutiae of business allows them to put forth more comprehensive guidelines for stunts. FIA even has a section devoted to stunt and fight choreography entitled "Stunts/Staged Fights," This allows FIA to define fight choreography as "a series of moves designed to create the illusion of physical combat without causing harm to the performer." Similarly, stunts are considered "any action sequence performed for artistic purposes and involving a possible injury to performers or others on set." This section includes the following bullet points:

- You should be allowed to be doubled by a professional stunt person, if you do not wish to be directly exposed to risk.
- Never misrepresent or overestimate your technical skills. Be honest about what you know how and what you don't.
- Never perform a stunt or a staged fight you have not adequately rehearsed before: you could seriously harm yourself or others around you. You should also be allowed to practice several times without the risk factor.
- Be sure you know who the stunt/fight director is and follow his/her direction. Do not push your body beyond its limits. If you feel the exercise is too testing, let the director know.
- Do insist on additional rehearsal time if you do not feel confident with your moves. Inadequate training can have very dire consequences for you and others around you .
- Stunts and fights can be physically demanding: do not perform them if you do not feel 100% fit. Keep your body hydrated by drinking regularly. Frequent breaks should be provided to limit fatigue.
- You should never be requested to perform a staged fight or a stunt other than the one you have trained and rehearsed for.

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<sup>137</sup> "ACTSAFE! FIA MINIMUM RECOMMENDED HEALTH AND SAFETY GUIDELINES FOR PERFORMERS WORKING IN FILM AND TELEVISION PRODUCTION" *International Federation of Actors*. Accessed October 20, 2017 [http://www.fia-actors.com/uploads/hs\\_guidebook\\_ftv\\_en.pdf](http://www.fia-actors.com/uploads/hs_guidebook_ftv_en.pdf).

- All rigging equipment should be inspected and tested regularly before use, especially after any alteration.
- Harnesses are to be considered a part of the rigging and not of the costume. They need to be specially adapted to the size, weight and choreography that the performer is required to follow.<sup>138</sup>

If we use these regulations as a guide to interpret a handful of the scenes discussed in this study, we can see that while this is an admirable attempt to safeguard both actors and production companies, the reaction of stunt crews and filmmakers on both sides of the Atlantic more often one of disregard. For American filmmakers, this set of rules holds no real importance because they are already regulated by SAG-AFTRA for better or worse. Furthermore, stunt artists who perform in Indonesia and Thailand are not members of these unions.

It is arguable that even if they were members, the films discussed in this study would be noticeably very different, or perhaps not even exist at all. Take for instance the scene in *The Raid* in which Rama, while outrunning a gang of machete wielding henchmen, tosses a thug over a railing where he lands on the middle of his spine on a lower railing. It's a shot in which a 2017 article on the legacy of the film states:

A lot of things had to happen for a miracle of a movie like *The Raid* to exist. Evans had to be working in Indonesia, a place where unions won't prevent stuntmen from doing absurdly dangerous shit for our entertainment. One shot, of a hitman falling and breaking his back on a staircase railing, is so fucking raw and realistic that it's almost impossible to believe the stuntman is still alive today.<sup>139</sup>

If we look back on and interpret what Evans said about this shot a different reality emerges for the stunt crew during this stunt. Once again, in Evans own words:

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<sup>138</sup> "ACTSAFE! FIA MINIMUM RECOMMENDED HEALTH AND SAFETY GUIDELINES FOR PERFORMERS WORKING IN FILM AND TELEVISION PRODUCTION" *International Federation of Actors*. Accessed October 20, 2017 [http://www.fia-actors.com/uploads/hs\\_guidebook\\_ftv\\_en.pdf](http://www.fia-actors.com/uploads/hs_guidebook_ftv_en.pdf)

<sup>139</sup> Tom Breihan, "Action Movies Don't Come Much More Visceral, Simple, or Awesome Than *The Raid*", *The A.V. Club*, October 20, 2017. <https://www.avclub.com/action-movies-don-t-come-much-more-visceral-simple-or-1819681034>

Where it went wrong is when we did that first take of it the guys pulling the wire pulled too hard. So instead of him going out on an arc and coming down it threw him across the way and smashed the back of his head into the wall. Then the guys with the wire they lost balance and dropped him and he ended up falling and missing the crash mats and hitting the ground down below, a 5 meter drop. Everyone on the crew there heart was in their mouths and we were all freaking out. We sort of thought something terrible had happened to him.<sup>140</sup>

FIA's regulations have a stipulation for wire work which states that "all rigging equipment should be inspected and tested before use." Therefore, it is clear that if this scene were to take place on a FIA or SAG-AFTRA set, the wirework would have to be tested multiple times before any actor or stunt performer would be allowed to be strapped into the harness. Had an accident occurred during the first take, the actor would have been sent to recover for longer than 4 days and the shot would have been altered for the sake of whoever else performed the stunt after him. SAG-AFTRA's stunt and safety digest for a similar scenario, we see that there is no specific designation for wire work. However, there is a section for reporting accidents of this nature that states, "In the event an accident occurs in the course of a Performer's employment which results in medical attention, producer will prepare and send to the union, as soon as practicable, a report setting forth the date, time, place, circumstances and nature of the injury as claimed."<sup>141</sup>

Alternatively, the response to the injury in question would have been negated because the rehearsal time on a SAG-AFTRA shoot prior to filming would have enabled the stunt team to discover the proper amount of pull necessary for the stunt. Thus, much of the danger of the shot would have been eliminated. However, it is arguable that such precise wire work may also have eliminated the perceived danger the audience experienced while watching the film.

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<sup>140</sup> *The Raid: Redemption*, Film, Directed by Gareth Evans (2012; Jakarta: PT. Merantau Films, 2012), Blu-ray

<sup>141</sup> "SAG-AFTRA Stunt & Safety 2017 TV/Theatrical Contracts Digest" SAG-AFTRA. Accessed October 20, 2017. [https://www.sagaftra.org/files/stunt\\_safety\\_digest\\_2014.pdf](https://www.sagaftra.org/files/stunt_safety_digest_2014.pdf)

Similarly, if we look at the impressive single take shot from *The Protector*, in which Tony Jaa's character storms a hotel floor by floor in the context of SAG-AFTRA/FIA regulations, we can infer that the sequence would have been markedly different on a U.S. set. As the FIA regulations state, "Stunts and fights can be physically demanding: do not perform them if you do not feel 100% fit. Frequent breaks should be provided to limit fatigue." As understood from the filmmaker's notes regarding this shot and a further analysis of single take shots, we can see that the fatigue of Jaa and the crew is secondary to the goal of capturing the shot in camera. This is exemplified by the production crew replacing the original steadicam operator with a Thai operator who is conditioned to the rigors of working on Thai sets.

If we look at a shot discussed earlier from *Ong-Bak* in which Jaa is lit on fire from the waist down and performs a flip kick onto another stunt performers face, we see yet another example of the production crew operating and filming a shot which would be prevented on a U.S. set. While the official stunt and safety digest for SAG-AFTRA has no section on fire-related stunts, the stunt professionals interviewed here state that the skills necessary for shots like this example referenced in *Ong-Bak* are worked out by the stunt coordinator before filming. Additionally, a glimpse of the FIA regulations for fire-related stunts reveals the following, "Never use naked flames on a shoot for the first time. Should you be asked to do so, you should refuse as it puts your safety and that of others around you at risk. Extended rehearsals should always be allowed to minimise risks."<sup>142</sup> When contrasted with Tony Jaa's own remarks from the shoot we see that the take used in the film directly contradicts this safety guideline. Nonetheless, it is a shot which is prominent in the marketing, critical, and commercial acclaim associated with the film.

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<sup>142</sup> "ACTSAFE! FIA MINIMUM RECOMMENDED HEALTH AND SAFETY GUIDELINES FOR PERFORMERS WORKING IN FILM AND TELEVISION PRODUCTION" *International Federation of Actors*. Accessed October 20, 2017 [http://www.fia-actors.com/uploads/hs\\_guidebook\\_ftv\\_en.pdf](http://www.fia-actors.com/uploads/hs_guidebook_ftv_en.pdf)

If there is one perceived guideline discussed here that is followed by for every film, filmmaker, and industry studied, it would seem to be the rule of rehearsal. That is, each of the fight scenes and action beats for the films analyzed here were worked out before filming. The aim of each of the films was to capture the action with a realism and authenticity and rehearsing those actions in camera was an integral component for success.. Examples include Gareth Evans and his crew creating the choreography on their films months before shooting, or Tony Jaa and his team who worked on their fight scenes for years before shooting them. Finally, Chad Stahelski and David Leitch argued for ample rehearsal time when negotiating their contracts because, “By the time we get to set, everyone has rehearsed together. The cameramen, the stunt guys, the actors. It’s on. Because what good does it do if everyone is rehearsing separately? That’s how great action sequences are born.”<sup>143</sup>

For all the discussion in this work on the importance and worth of martial arts cinema in both exhibition for audiences and discourse for academia, the individual perform remains central to the argument for more safety regulations on martial arts sets. In the U.S. alone there have been several fatal accidents in the months preceding the publishing of this study that serve to harken home the absolute and terminal danger that stunt professionals face every day in their stunt and fight sequences. On July 12th, 2017 on the set of season 8 of *The Walking Dead*, stunt performer John Bernecker fell 22 feet from off a railing narrowly missing his designated landing zone of crash mats and cardboard boxes.<sup>144</sup> Five hours after being rushed to the hospital he passed away.

A month later on August 14th, 2017 on the set of *Deadpool 2*, directed by *John Wick* alum

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<sup>143</sup> Jacob Knight, “Interview: Chad Stahelski and Jordan Perry Talk John Wick 2 and The Nitty Gritty of Action Filmmaking”, *Birth Movies Death*, February 9, 2017, <http://birthmoviesdeath.com/2017/02/09/interview-chad-stahelski-jordan-perry-talk-john-wick-2-and-the-nitty-gritty>.

<sup>144</sup> Jonathan Handel, “Walking Dead’ Stuntman Death: New Investigation Details Emerge”, *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 19, 2017. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/walking-dead-stuntman-death-new-investigation-details-merge-1022384>

David Leitch, professional motorcycle rider Joi Harris was killed when the motorcycle stunt she performed went awry leading to her death on the first take. It was an accident that, according to *The Hollywood Reporter*, could have been prevented:

She was improving, but I was watching her and, oh my God, I thought, ‘It’s just a matter of time before she crashes into a wall or runs somebody over,’” says one stunt performer who had been training Harris the day before the crash that killed her. A member of the stunt team alerted the movie’s producers to these concerns but was ignored, according to the source who trained Harris.<sup>145</sup>

By the end of 2017, both accidents were still under the investigation of local law enforcement as well as SAG-AFTRA. It is clear that for stunt professionals, the danger inherent in stunts and choreography is a given considering their chosen profession. For each of the stunt men and women interviewed here, the reality of their chosen profession and the goal that they have set for themselves when it comes to stunts, and on-screen fights is both unique and varied.

When asked the question, “Would you be willing to be in films shot the same way (lower budget, shorter shooting schedule, more dangerous stunts, emphasis on real contact in stunts and fights) for stunt coordinators and directors who had a proven track record of making great martial arts films such as *Ong-Bak*, *The Protector*, *Merantau*, or *The Raid*”, stunt woman Shawna West replied:

If I were in my 20’s yes. Yeah I think I absolutely would take that opportunity to work with some of the best martial artists in the world. To show some amazing footage and get to do amazing choreography I think I would at the time. Because I think my body could have bounced back. But now? Hell no. NO. Not at all. I will continue to hustle work and I will continue to make small videos and do whatever it takes just to put food

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<sup>145</sup> Scott Johnson, “‘Deadpool 2’ Set Death Likely Could Have Been Prevented”, *The Hollywood Reporter*, August 23, 2017. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/deadpool-2-set-death-could-have-been-prevented-1031814>.

on the table. But, fame or success at that level is just not worth a torn ligament or a rib through your lung. I'm really glad that our safety precautions are so stringent. Because I have been on sets earlier in my career, I was on sets that were dangerous and safety precautions weren't they were just null and void. And I got hurt really bad. It looked awesome, but I'm really glad that I don't have to do that anymore. Because I want to keep doing this. And I want to make sure that my body can keep doing that. And I can only do that by staying safe and having my coordinators keep me safe.<sup>146</sup>

Similarly, Josh Vinyard noted:

A film such as *The Raid*, I would love to. But as far as Thai style of filming goes, they can keep that! I pride myself on being able to come to work the next day, and the possibility of being able to walk normally 20 years from now!<sup>147</sup>

Donald Brooks added:

Hell yeah. I mean we do that kinda stuff with each other all the time. I know my limits, I know what I can do, I know my body pretty well. I've been doing active shit, gymnastics or parkour or martial arts for a while. So I know what I can and can't do. If I know I can't do it, I'll say can I get a rehearsal? Can we go a slower speed? If that's going to lose you a job oh well. The key thing is longevity. You have to take care of yourself first.<sup>148</sup>

Lacey Robinson remarked:

A stunt mantra: Live to die/work another day. Would working with a renowned coordinator and director that could lead to major exposure be an amazing opportunity that I've spent years working towards and countless sacrifices - YES! But I'm going to go back to risk versus reward. One of the highest achievements is creating work that becomes widely recognized as excellent and immortalized through film, but at the end of the day no stunt is worth a life (or being handicapped). Also think of it this way, stunts are my passion, you don't spend years working towards something to only do it once. You aim to get to the top and stay there as long as possible. If you compromise safety, the time you spend enjoying the fruit of your labor as a respected professional becomes

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<sup>146</sup> Shawna West (SAG-AFTRA Stuntman), interview by Hector Gonzales, July 20, 2017, interview 2, transcript.

<sup>147</sup> Josh Vinyard (SAG-AFTRA Stuntman), interview by Hector Gonzales, July 14, 2017, interview 3, transcript.

<sup>148</sup> Donald Brooks (SAG-AFTRA Stuntman), interview by Hector Gonzales, July 28, 2017, interview 5, transcript.

exponentially shorter. So yes, I would work for less money, on a tight timeline with difficult stunts, but the one thing that can't be compromised is safety. I have to feel like I am going to be able go home to my (currently nonexistent) cat, friends and family at the end of the day.<sup>149</sup>

And Aaron Alexander surmise:

Absolutely. What's funny is that, and I actually came to this realization a while ago that I'm not really in this business of the entertainment industry to get famous. I'm in this to create. I want to continuously create and the people that have inspired me, the "87Eleven's", "the Merantaus", "the Raids", I watch these guys on their social media and they get injured and they have to recuperate. For me if someone was like "hey, we want you to do this. We're going to have you side kick a dude on a motorcycle and the motorcycle might clip your leg. " I'm going to be like can we train it? Can we get him on a bicycle first? As long as I can rehearse instead of like "hey ok you are going to be needed on set now and we are going to be doing this really ridiculous thing without rehearsal." You have to be smart and have a high knowledge of self. Because if you don't then you shouldn't be in the business anyway. Most importantly this or that director or whoever wants you to do something is not going to make or break your career. And that's where the longevity comes in. There's more than one director, or writer or producer out there.<sup>150</sup>

Taken together, the responses of these stunt professionals, whose work represents a wide-ranging cross section of current American mainstream media, is one of personal safety, responsibility, and longevity. The interviews suggest a willingness and appreciation for the work performed by their Thai and Indonesian counterparts, while simultaneously understanding that the work done by those counterparts is not what is asked of them on U.S. sets. They seem to understand that in the course of their work they are in situations that have a certain amount of protection based on the regulations and and rules set forth by their union, SAG-AFTRA. Even when accidents occur, they have a certain amount of confidence in the regulations and a higher level of trust in the supportive intentions of their co-workers and coordinators. Their responses

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<sup>149</sup> Lacey Robinson (SAG-AFTRA Stuntman), interview by Hector Gonzales, July 21, 2017, interview 4, transcript.

<sup>150</sup> Aaron Alexander (SAG-AFTRA Stuntman), interview by Hector Gonzales, June 16, 2017, interview 1, transcript.



also imply that any and all productions, including martial arts cinema are guided by the dominant golden rule that Hollywood is a business first. Any and all productions, including martial arts cinema is guided by that dominant golden rule. As Josh Vinyard summarized when discussing the lack of the type of action beats and filming styles seen in the films of Thailand and Indonesia comparative to the productions he has been in:

When it comes to Hollywood, I think individuals are absolutely capable of capturing action like this. But as far as studio's go, at this point in time, no. I do not think that[they can capture the same type of action]. They are set in ways, have trouble accepting that action is a completely separate skill set of it's own, and lastly... It is a business. If making something more spectacular comes at a cost without a foreseeable increase of profits, good luck selling it to your producers!<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Josh Vinyard (SAG-AFTRA Stuntman), interview by Hector Gonzales, July 14, 2017, interview 3, transcript.

## CONCLUSION

Fans of martial arts cinema expect a purity in their most beloved films. When Bruce Lee stood in front of his opponent O'Hara to avenge the death of his sister in *Enter The Dragon* in 1972, he expressed his emotion through impressive physicality. He created an action beat that was contextualized by the storytelling that preceded it and was fulfilled by his body in motion. Over 40 years later this work continues to inspire filmmakers of the martial arts genre and inform audiences around the world as to the genre's authenticity in storytelling, aesthetics, and physical expression that defines the most successful martial arts films.

Since then, the films of the martial arts genre have been through many incarnations, each as varied as the next. This study looked at a particular approach undertaken by filmmakers in films produced from 2003 to 2017, first in Thailand and then Indonesia and finally from the United States. The films discussed here strive to demonstrate authenticity and realism. Framed by cultural norms and national martial art styles, this study examines the films of Panna Rittikrai, Gareth Evans, Tony Jaa, and Iko Uwais. These films showcase brutal and fluid fight choreography that advanced the narrative and introduced international audiences outside the countries of origin to innovative martial art conventions that advanced the genre. The critical and commercial success of these films led the filmmakers and stars to international success and allowed experienced American filmmakers to incorporate more daring and authentic choreography, with varying degrees of success. This trend is exemplified by the appropriation of these conventions by the successful *Bourne* and *John Wick* franchises during this time. This study examined the widespread acclaim for the realism and authenticity of these films at the cost of the individual actor or stunt performer who is called upon to perform increasingly dangerous stunt and fight choreography in an effort to stand above the rest of the genre.

Through contextual analysis of the fight scenes in these films I argue that the mastery of the individual performers should be celebrated for the impressiveness of the physical artistry on display while calling into question the necessity of scenes which may cause irrevocable harm, or even death, to the stunt performer. Through contextual analysis of the marketing for the films and through the qualitative analysis of the words and actions of the filmmakers, I make the case that the fighting and choreography on display is essential for these filmmakers to establish their films, their actors, and their own careers on the international cinematic stage. Through interviews with fellow stunt performers I showcase the perspective of those who would willfully throw their bodies into peril for the sake of their art. These interviews provide added insight into the complexity of those who seek to create a lasting impression on audiences by engaging in simulated hand-to-hand combat with another human being.

This study illustrates that despite the craft and choreography that goes into a film, the filmmakers are only one half of the equation for success in the genre of martial arts films. The work of iconic performers and filmmakers constitute unique and impressive contributions to the martial arts canon. These can be seen in the screen personas of Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, Tony Jaa, or Iko Uwais. And that work is worthy of both the celebration and discourse of these films exemplified by their sheer visceral entertainment qualities. As Bordwell notes:

In the art of popular cinema, vivid visuals are shot through with emotion. In order to attract a mass audience, popular art deals in emotions like anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and indignation. Since these feelings evidently operate in all cultures, a film that appeals to them travels well. Cinema is particularly good at arousing emotions kinesthetically, through action and music. When this quality is captured in vigorous, strictly patterned movement, in nicely judged framings and crackling cutting, with overwhelming music and sound effects, you can feel yourself tensing and twitching to the rhythms of the fight. This is filmic emotion at its most sheerly physical.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and The Art of Entertainment*(Cambridge: Irvington Way Institute Press, 2000), pg. 8.

Every martial arts performer and filmmaker has strived to match the authenticity of Bruce Lees' performances in their own work. More often than not, the quality that resonates with audiences around the world is the authentic expression of the physicality of a martial artist. And that physicality on screen comes with a cost in real life. This study demonstrates that a new generation of filmmakers, from Thailand and then Indonesia, redefined the aesthetics of authenticity and realism that audiences around the globe expected. Recent box office figures and critical acclaim have shown that audiences have reinvested once again in the martial arts genre<sup>153</sup>

American filmmakers appreciation and appropriation of the work done by these international artists, created spaces for many performers from both countries to appear in their films. Eventually the business success of those films provided opportunities for both international stars to infiltrate Hollywood as well as for consummate U.S. stunt professionals of the industry to craft their own work in Hollywood. This global shift placed even greater emphasis on the conventions of realism and authenticity in the genre, reflecting back to the original work of Thailand and Indonesia filmmakers, from the early 2000s.

These films can be analyzed on multiple levels through critical, commercial, or academic lenses. But whether examined as, action beats, complete films, or for cultural differences in production, the physicality, toil, and sacrifice of the martial artist and stunt performer is the underlying factor that creates the constructed reality of the "authentic". The authenticity and realism that defines martial arts cinema will continue to be a key factor in the critical success and audience acceptance of the films. It is important to note that this constructed reality obscures the actual safety and health of the stunt professionals and actors as they engage in filmed combat for the sake of their art. But whether a critic or a fan, audiences around the world should understand

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<sup>153</sup> "Action - Martial Arts", Box Office Mojo, accessed July 17, 2017. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=martialarts.htm>.

that the realism which defines the best of the martial arts genre to date is only made possible by an individual who strives, in tandem with directors and crews, to capture the human body in motion in it's most basic, primal, and visceral form.

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## **Vita**

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