Bruce Lee as director and the star as author

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Abstract
This article examines Bruce Lee’s films as a director as well as his influence on films in which he starred. Using Richard Dyer’s “star studies” framework in conjunction with Patrick McGilligan’s notion of the “actor as auteur,” this article analyzes Bruce Lee’s star persona and his authorial power and contends that a case can be made for Lee’s authorship even in films for which he did not serve as the director. Against the backdrop of Golden Harvest and the New Hollywood–modeled Hong Kong production context in which Lee worked, Lee’s fight scenes as a director are juxtaposed with his fight scenes as a star in the interest of identifying similarities and differences toward the goal of identifying greater similarities than critics and scholars have hitherto realized. Ultimately, this article proposes that so overpowering was Lee’s stardom that, whether as “merely” a star or as a “true” auteur, every Bruce Lee film bears his irrepressible signature.

Keywords
Authorship, Bruce Lee, Hong Kong cinema, kung fu cinema, star studies

In this article, I will use Richard Dyer’s (1979/1998) “star studies” framework in conjunction with Patrick McGilligan’s notion of the “actor as auteur” (McGilligan, 1975/1979) to conduct an investigation of both films in which Bruce Lee starred and films which he directed. My contention is that so overpowering was Bruce Lee’s stardom and so influential was his fight choreography that, even for films which he did not direct, a case can be made for Lee’s authorship. This argument will be made against the historical backdrop of the New Hollywood–modeled Hong Kong production context in which Lee worked and the place therein of Golden Harvest, the studio which contracted Lee to star in his first two films, the success of which allowed him to branch out and establish the satellite company Concord with Golden Harvest co-founder Raymond Chow. This article will also help bring a larger awareness to Bruce Lee’s role as an author in his films. Bruce Lee’s fame has reached a level that far outstrips his celebrity and status as a star when he was alive. Because of

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this, many people know the name and image of Bruce Lee, but a lot of people have not seen a full Bruce Lee film, or realize the level that Bruce Lee himself was involved in the making of his films. This is an important topic, and while Bruce Lee has been written about extensively in film studies and other academic disciplines, his role as an author of his films deserves wider attention. Bruce Lee was a pioneering figure in the history of Hong Kong cinema and led the way for other Hong Kong stars like Michael Hui and Jackie Chan to follow his example and create their own subsidiary companies and direct their own films.

To begin with Dyer’s study of stars, Dyer truly laid the groundwork for film scholars vis-à-vis star studies. His famous book *Stars* (Dyer, 1979/1998) quickly became one of the key theoretical texts on star studies and it still stands as one of the best overall surveys on how stars function within a filmmaking system. Dyer’s framework is relevant beyond the confines of Hollywood and can be used to examine other filmmaking industries. In the present case, both Hollywood and Hong Kong developed a star system, and relevant to both is Dyer’s conception of film authorship and where stars fit in his conceptual landscape.

**Authorship in film and the star as author**

Authorship, as Dyer (1979/1998) was well aware, “has long been an issue in film studies” (p. 151). This issue of attribution comes up frequently because of the collaborative nature of film production. For his part, Dyer outlines five types of authorship. The first is “individual authorship.” This is essentially the classic “auteur theory” which posits that one person, more often than not the director, is the sole author. Regardless of whether the auteur in question wrote the script, edited the film, and so on, the presupposition is that every film is bent to the auteur’s “creative will,” hence the ability to see in an auteur’s body of work certain repeated traits or signatures (Dyer, 1979/1998, p. 151).

“Multiple authorship” and “collective authorship” deviate from the classic auteurist paradigm and allow space for different “authorial voices,” even if such production groups/teams tend to be formed around a director like John Ford or Ingmar Bergman, thus leaving as an open question why, or what, individual authorship is conceptually lacking. “Corporate authorship” is a totally different animal, postulating that film studios, or Hollywood as a whole, or even the very system of capitalism, deserve authorship credit over any individual or group of individual filmmaker(s).

For my purposes in this article, Dyer’s final category of authorship, “Stars as authors,” will be my point of focus. Regarding film stardom, Dyer (1979/1998) made an important observation, which was that “a star, in films, publicity and promotion, is a semiotic construction,” and he maintained that just because that constructed entity “exhibits continuities” that “does not prove that the star is responsible for them. S/he may be, but also may not be” (p. 152). For a precedent on this track of stars as authors, Dyer (1979/1998) references Patrick McGilligan’s groundbreaking study of James Cagney and quotes him at length on the notion of “the actor as auteur” (p. 153):

The auteur theory can be revised and repurposed with actors in mind: under certain circumstances, an actor may influence a film as much as a writer, director or producer; some actors are more influential than others; and there are certain rare few performers whose acting capabilities and screen personas are so powerful that they embody and define the very essence of their films. If an actor is only responsible for acting but is not involved in any of the artistic decisions of filmmaking, then it is accurate surely to refer to the actor as a semi-passive icon, a symbol that is manipulated by the writers and directors. But actors who not only influence artistic decisions (casting, writing, directing, etc.) but demand certain limitations on the basis of their screen personas, may justly be regarded as “auteurs.” When the performer becomes so important to a production that he or she changes lines, adlibs, shifts meaning, influences the narrative and style of a film
McGilligan’s conception of the actor as auteur is easy to map onto the late career of Bruce Lee. As part of Lee’s contract with Golden Harvest, he had a voice regarding changes to the script, even on his first film for Golden Harvest, *The Big Boss* (1971), as well as control of the fight choreography in all of the fight scenes in which he would appear (C. M. Lee, 2013, p. 43). After establishing Concord, Lee took complete control over his next two projects, *The Way of the Dragon* (1972) and the unfinished *The Game of Death*, and even upon collaborating with Warner Bros. he asserted himself by demanding the title *Enter the Dragon* (1973) (L. Lee, 1989, pp. 132–133). Extending beyond McGilligan’s framework, Kyle Barrowman (2012) has also written about Bruce Lee and his unique authorial position. Barrowman believes that using the auteur theory as a heuristic is generally useful in film studies and specifically useful in studying Lee’s films; as he writes regarding the heuristic utility of the concept of authorship,

the first area where the concept of authorship appears to be the best method for classification and analysis is when the scholar turns his or her attention to the small number of “star-auteurs,” or “starteurs,” who have “emerged out of the morass of feature film production with their independence intact.” (Barrowman, 2012)

In this passage, Barrowman (2012) is quoting from the work of Laurence F Knapp, who conceived with specific reference to Clint Eastwood the entity of the “starteur,” a filmmaking entity with “financial and artistic control over his or her film projects and iconography.” As Knapp (1996) explained,

Starteurs have a self-reflective relationship to their work; their films are an extended dialogue with their screen personae, an attempt to shape, reshape, and break the mold that gave them their initial creative and commercial independence . . . With great delicacy and insight, they are capable of making successive films that deconstruct or circumnavigate their personae without reducing them to bathos, parody, or caricature. Their longevity and singular status [result from] a direct understanding of themselves, their craft, time period, and archetypal appeal. (p. 2)

Clearly, Knapp’s articulation of the starteur hews very closely to Dyer’s and McGilligan’s articulations of actor auteurs. For his part, Barrowman is keen to distinguish between stars with a lot of clout, from classical Hollywood stars like Cagney and Cary Grant through iconoclasts like Marlon Brando and Steve McQueen up to blockbuster icons like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Bruce Willis, and starteurs, from Charlie Chaplin to Woody Allen up to Clint Eastwood. In reference to the former, Barrowman (2012) invokes the work of Dave Saunders (2009), who, in his insightful analysis of the Schwarzenegger star text, regarded directors like James Cameron and John McTiernan as merely the “nominal authors” (p. 5) of films such as *The Terminator* (1984) and *Predator* (1987), for, ultimately, Cameron and McTiernan were “themselves subject to the star text that defines the essence of the films.” Once again, it is easy to map this onto the career of Bruce Lee and make the case that, in films like *The Big Boss*, *Fist of Fury*, and *Enter the Dragon*, Lo Wei and Robert Clouse were merely the nominal authors.

Bringing these ideas together, Dyer was of the opinion that one must make a “theoretical distinction” between stars and auteurs, whereas I lean more in the direction of Knapp’s hybrid concept of the starteur. In the case of Bruce Lee, while his skill as a director never reached the heights of a Chaplin or an
Eastwood, he nevertheless qualifies as a starteur. Added to which, even when he was not directing himself, Bruce Lee was totally in control of his star image and his performances. This he learned by watching and then emulating his friend Steve McQueen; as noted by Matthew Polly (2018), Lee learned from McQueen that “the star, not the director as in China, is dominant. McQueen replaced directors he didn’t respect and chewed through producers. He bent everyone on set to his will” (p. 229).

In the end, Bruce Lee simply had that special “star quality” that pulled focus from anyone and everyone around him; he had charisma in abundance and he turned audiences into instant fans. And he was savvy enough to harness that charisma both as a star and as a starteur. Every film in which Bruce Lee appeared during his 1970s run is a “Bruce Lee film”—not a Lo Wei film or a Robert Clouse film. But an interesting question posed by Dyer relates to who the “Bruce Lee” referred to when referring to a given “Bruce Lee film” really is. Analyzing how, in semiotic terms, stars “signify,” Dyer (1979/1998) maintains that who a star “really is” is an important part of how they signify, it is an important component to their stardom, even though audiences can only know stars “textually,” via their films and associated media appearances (pp. 2–3). This is why it is so important to producers to “construct” a certain star “image.” Dyer (1979/1998) discussed how stars are studio capital (p. 10), which is a perspective that is important to understand specifically in relation to Bruce Lee, for, famously, before he signed with Raymond Chow and Golden Harvest upon returning to Hong Kong, Run Run Shaw tried to sign Lee to Shaw Brothers. Had Lee not had the savvy to protect himself, he would have found himself working on a standard 7-year, US$200-a-week contract and would have essentially been a product of the Shaw Brothers (see Desser, 2000, p. 33). Instead, Lee opted to sign a US$15,000 two-picture deal with Golden Harvest, securing for himself more money and more freedom (see L. Lee, 1989, p. 106).

The star image and tension with real life

This is not to imply, however, that Lee was constantly at loggerheads with the Hong Kong production apparatus. There was a very productive synergy regarding the marketing of Lee upon his return to Hong Kong in the early 1970s. Dyer (1979/1998) made a point of emphasizing the importance for people like Marilyn Monroe, aka Norma Jean Baker, and John Wayne, aka Marion Morrison, of stage names (pp. 97–98). In Lee’s case, he was first billed during his days as a child star as Lee Siu Lung, which, in Cantonese, means “Lee Little Dragon.” In promotional materials, Golden Harvest used this name to remind audiences who Lee was, that is, to enhance his star image and encompass his earlier appearances on Chinese screens. Lee, for his part, picked up on this tactic and consciously incorporated the dragon moniker; he even famously used “Dragon” in two of his film titles, The Way of the Dragon and Enter the Dragon.

Beyond stage names, star personas are also crucial in the construction of a star. In Lee’s case, his persona was, of course, the ultimate martial artist. Similar to John Wayne being associated with Westerns, Bruce Lee was associated with martial arts action. However, as Dyer (2004) astutely observed in a subsequent study of film stardom, “star images are always extensive, multimedia, [and] intertextual” (p. 3). Regarding Lee’s star image, his appearances on Hong Kong Television Broadcasts Limited (HK-TVB) and his coverage in Golden Harvest and Hong Kong cinema magazines and tabloids added to his “official” cinematic star texts to create a layered persona. To go even further, Dyer noted vis-à-vis Marilyn Monroe that the potency of her image and persona would often outpace and overshadow her characters if not the films themselves. Analogously, Bruce Lee remains one of the most potent film icons, yet, today, more and more people know his image and his persona apart from/outside of his actual film work.
In this vein, Dyer also brings up the possible tensions that can arise between the real star and their persona. I mentioned the efforts of Lee and Golden Harvest to construct the Bruce Lee star image with reference to his previous life as a child star. Despite these efforts, however, the Bruce Lee star image was not without its black marks. For example, rumors (which proved to be true; Polly, 2018) circulated constantly through the Hong Kong press, film industry, and fan community regarding Lee’s promiscuity and his drug use. In many tabloids, in fact, Lee was seen as something of a heel, a brash, hot-tempered loudmouth. Hence, the discrepancy between the various Bruce Lees that are out there circulating, from the tabloid heel to the larger-than-life screen icon to the martial arts philosopher-prophet. All of these various (contradictory) currents flow into the entity that is “Bruce Lee.”

Paul McDonald wrote a follow-up chapter to Dyer’s *Stars* in 1998. In this chapter, he examines the work on star studies that had been done since Dyer first wrote *Stars* in 1979. There is a section directly related to Bruce Lee where he talks about Lee in relation to 1980s action stars, and Yvonne Tasker’s seminal study of the star image of muscular bodies of the 1980s and 1990s. He notes that Yvonne Tasker (1993) in *Spectacular Bodies* examines a variety of reasons why the muscular bodies of both men and women appeared with such frequency on the screen, including as McDonald puts it “how bodies act as key signifiers of cultural beliefs” (Dyer, 1998, pp. 180–181). McDonald points to a limitation of Tasker; he states she sees the muscles as a sign, but not what they do, taking the action out of action cinema (Dyer, 1998, p.182). He uses *Enter the Dragon* to make his point:

the fight scenes in *Enter the Dragon* (Robert Clouse, 1973, US/Hong Kong) show that not only Bruce Lee’s body is tone and strong, by its speed and motion, that the body is also flexible fluent and accurate. With each action, Lee’s body represents a sense of being in the world by its movement through space and time. (Dyer, 1998, p.182)

Tasker (1993) does mention Hong Kong action cinema, and she notes that “. . . The figure of the bodybuilder as star can be contrasted to the male stars of the Hong Kong action tradition” and she explains this contrast as “The distinction is between the image of the body in action, so central to fight films, and images of the top-heavy, almost statuesque, figure of a bodybuilder who essentially strikes a pose within an action narrative” (p. 73). Bruce Lee’s role as a choreographer and his body moving through space and time adds to his role of an author in his films. I see Lee as being the precursor to the muscular bodies of the 1980s Hollywood stars like Stallone. Lee was constantly showing the audience his muscular torso, which was the product of hard work, but also looked good aesthetically on screen. Lee purposefully built his body for performance, but also for the statuesque look it had, and would perform bodybuilding poses outside of the action, most notably in a training scene on a balcony in his directorial debut *The Way of the Dragon* (1972).

**Bruce as a director and the Golden Harvest structure**

To his credit, Lee was aware of the many faces to “Bruce Lee” that were in circulation. In moving from star to starteur, he took as his primary task the projection of an ideal “Bruce Lee.” Toward this goal, Lee formed the satellite company Concord with Golden Harvest co-founder Raymond Chow. The role played by Chow in Lee’s ascent to stardom cannot be overstated. Indeed, Chow’s place in the history of Hong Kong cinema looms as large as Lee’s, though Chow’s place was behind the scenes. Sek Kei outlined Chow’s trajectory from Shaw Brothers employee to Golden Harvest founder. At one point, Chow was Run Run Shaw’s second-in-command. However, Chow was not
satisfied with the Shaw Brothers set-up, so, in 1970, he left and with Leonard Ho and Leung Fung formed Golden Harvest. According to Kei, Chow had identified limitations in the vertically integrated studio model, and he envisioned a different system of production modeled on New Hollywood. His shrewdest move, though, was undoubtedly snagging Lee upon his return to Hong Kong. Not only did Chow expertly court Lee, he was willing to work with him on an individual basis, granting him unprecedented freedom while he was under contract and then working with him to form Concord (see Kei, 2013, p. 30). This is one of the clearest examples of Chow’s adoption of Hollywood business practice. As he told the Hong Kong International Film Festival in 2010, he knew that “many American studios had under them many smaller companies that served as a platform of collaboration with the line producers, who were in charge of the films produced by the companies” (see Li, 2010, p. 98), and, as he told the Hong Kong Film Archive a few years later, he specifically “used the Hollywood model as a guideline to work with many directors and producers, giving them a great degree of freedom and room for development. We were the first company that operated on this system back then” (see Fung & Yam, 2013, p. 129).

Having fulfilled his original two-picture deal (and breaking box office records with both) and established Concord, Lee set out to write, direct, and star in *The Way of the Dragon*. In preparation for this new challenge, Lee reportedly “bought and read a dozen books dealing with all aspects of filmmaking” (Thomas, 1994, p. 147). Similar to his approach to the martial arts, studying everything that he could and synthesizing everything in his own unique and idiosyncratic way, Lee studied filmmaking and synthesized everything that he had experienced in virtually a lifetime on sets and everything that he had read about how to make movies. He and Chow also worked together to ensure that Lee would be surrounded by experienced talent. For instance, they selected veteran Japanese cinematographer Nishimoto Tadashi, who had previously worked for the Shaw Brothers and had shot King Hu’s *Come Drink with Me* (1966), to shoot *The Way of the Dragon*.

Lee himself reported that “on the whole” he was “satisfied with the result” of his first foray in directing, but, at the same time, he did acknowledge that “there is of course room for improvement” (see Li, 2010, p. 144). Some critics and scholars, like Barrowman (2012) and Lou Gaul (1997), hold *The Way of the Dragon* in very high regard, while others, like Alex Ben Block (1974) and Bey Logan (1995), have a much lower opinion of it. For my part, I think that, despite his inexperience, this is not to say that with more time and experience he never would have reached that level. Quality levels aside, however, it is interesting to explore the similarities and differences between the films in which Lee was merely a star and the films for which he was the starteur.

On this front, Cheng Yu once made a point of differentiating the way that Lee directed a fight scene from the way that Lo Wei directed one. As he saw it, “Lo Wei depended on editing and close-ups to convey the impact of the fight. [He] also often used subjective point-of-view shots such as Lee kicking or punching directly into the camera” (Yu, 1984, p. 25). Lee, on the contrary, preferred using long takes and long shots and really utilizing the widescreen format. That said, Lee did incorporate some of the techniques that Yu described as redolent of Lo Wei’s work, such as point-of-view shots of Lee kicking into the camera in *The Way of the Dragon*. Indeed, despite Lee’s famous feud with Lo Wei and his low opinion of him as a director, Lee nevertheless went to school on Lo Wei’s style and used what he felt was useful in his own directorial efforts.

Taking a closer look, some critics and scholars have argued that *The Way of the Dragon* is a kind of remake of *The Big Boss* (see Fung, 2013; Rayns, 1984). Both films are about a Chinese country bumpkin who arrives in a foreign land and who defeats foreign enemies on the strength of his martial arts prowess. Of course, Lee’s authorial stamp is noticeable in the way that, in *The Way of
the Dragon, he plays it as a broad comedy. But there is a larger point worth making vis-à-vis Hong Kong productions versus Hollywood productions. In Hong Kong cinema, the action choreographer has total control in the conceiving and executing of fight scenes; in some cases, in fact, the action choreographer is effectively an action director, controlling even camera angles and providing editing instructions. Some directors would even leave action sequences in the hands of their “action directors” and would not even bother with being on the set when action sequences were being shot (see Lau, 1980, p. 34).

This adds another wrinkle to the authorship debate in relation to Bruce Lee’s films and the star-as-author/starteur conversation. Even more so than the biggest Hollywood stars, Lee was in a position right from the jump to take control of directing action sequences. In an interview with the Hong Kong International Film Festival in 2010, one of Bruce Lee’s stuntmen, Billy Chan, explained how Lee worked with director Lo Wei and action director Han Ying Chieh, relating that “Lee had a certain degree of say in The Big Boss. Starting from day one, he had a lot of ideas, and Master Han listened to him” (Li, 2010, p. 110). As to the climactic confrontation between Lee’s and Han’s characters at the end of The Big Boss, Chan recalled that “the fight between [them] was choreographed by both of them [and then] by the time of Fist of Fury Lee had taken charge and Master Han had become a sort of an assistant to the martial arts director” (Li, 2010, p. 111).

In one sense, then, The Way of the Dragon was not Lee’s directorial debut. Lee may never have had the chance to direct his own screenplay, but Lee had already been accustomed to conceiving, directing, and performing action sequences by the time he took the reins for The Way of the Dragon and The Game of Death. Regarding the latter, which, like The Way of the Dragon, was also shot in collaboration with Nishimoto Tadashi, the choreography and the filmmaking are both even better than The Way of the Dragon. Lee’s experiences working on the Lo Wei films ensured that his learning curve would be a fast one; in The Game of Death, there are no visible misses or off-rhythm sequences between the actors in the choreography (the same cannot be said for The Way of the Dragon). It is possible to watch the full almost 35 minutes of Game of Death Bruce Lee shot edited into the finale of the film in John Little’s documentary Bruce Lee: A Warriors Journey (2001) (Little, 2001). The martial arts featured and performed were also more complex and the choreography was more intricate, yet, on the other side of the coin, Lee used wires for enhanced dramatic effect (specifically with James Tien being lifted off the ground by Kareem Abdul-Jabbar), attempting to synthesize the realistic and the theatrical in a more organic way than had been attempted in the Lo Wei films.

In sum, Lee was clearly improving as a filmmaker, and the way that he was thinking about martial arts cinema opened a door and set a bar for later Golden Harvest starteurs like Sammo Hung and Jackie Chan. Lee wanted to bring Hollywood production techniques and standards to Hong Kong, and he used his star power and his authorial vision to do it. In doing so, he alongside Raymond Chow changed the nature of Hong Kong film production. The Shaw Brothers would continue to use the old factory method until they suspended film production in 1985 (see Chung, 2003, pp. 13–14). Golden Harvest, meanwhile, continued with the satellite company and star-director model that had been instituted by Lee and they found repeated box office success. Due to his untimely death, it is impossible to know what a full career as a star and as a director would have looked like for Lee. It seems likely, though, that he would have continued to go back and forth between Hong Kong and Hollywood. He may even have reached a point where, like Clint Eastwood, he would have stopped writing and directing only for himself and started working on projects entirely behind the scenes, crafting vehicles for other stars. Who knows? Beyond such speculation, what can be stated unequivocally is that, while the degrees may differ, due to his overwhelming
star power and his innovative authorial vision, every Bruce Lee film, from *The Big Boss* to *Enter the Dragon*, is truly a “Bruce Lee film.”

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**Notes**
1. For examples of technical errors in *The Way of the Dragon*, consider the out-of-focus shot in the opening airport sequence when Lee encounters the little boy eating the ice cream cone, certain strikes in fight sequences that clearly did not land and come off unrealistically, and a choppy jump cut when Lee is returning to an upright position during his and Norris’ warm-ups prior to their Colosseum confrontation after stretching with his head at his knees. Although minor in the grand scheme of things, such instances are evidence of a rookie filmmaker still getting comfortable with the whole filmmaking apparatus. For less charitable critics and scholars, however, such instances were evidence of the overall low quality of Lee’s directorial debut. Law Kar (1984), for one, claimed that he and others did not commonly think of Lee as a good director (and Kar went a step further and claimed that Lee was not even commonly thought of as a good actor) (p. 65), while Stephen Teo (1997) a bit more charitably maintained that *The Way of the Dragon* is nothing more than “a flawed and transitional work which must now remain Lee’s testament, a reminder of themes which could have developed further and with more assurance and confidence had he lived” (p. 116).

2. Lee’s evolution as an action director in particular is also evident in *Enter the Dragon*, for which Lee received a “Fighting Sequences Staged By” credit. Although Robert Clouse is the nominal author of the film, Lee had a say in almost every aspect of the production. He even filmed the opening Shaolin temple sequence himself. Andre Morgan, who was working for Golden Harvest and Raymond Chow, recalled that the opening Shaolin temple sequence “was actually shot as a second unit day at the end of the film” and that “Bruce directed this sequence” (see Friedman, 2013, p. 27). Lee also had complete control over the choreography, and his aesthetic vision is discernible in the intricate drawings that he made to plan out the fights ahead of time (see Wong, 2013, pp. 266–267).

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