HONORS PROJECT:
CREATING A HONG KONG FILM-INSPIRED STORYBOARD

Foreign cinema is nothing new. Many countries produce their own films, separate from the giant media moguls of America’s Hollywood. Each country or region has their own unique style of film. But perhaps the most influential is found in the Kung-Fu films of Hong Kong. As I was researching and creating my own storyboard, I learned a lot from these films. I am convinced that Hong Kong cinema is one of the simplest, and yet most intricate styles of foreign film out there. Throughout this write-up, I will recount the process of creation of my storyboard, successes and failures. I will then speak of specific aspects of Hong Kong cinema that I learned and tried to apply to my work. Finally, I will touch on the limitations of myself and my project, as well as imagine how I could improve it with time and other benefits.

Before I could get to creating anything, I had to familiarize myself with Hong Kong cinema. Up to that point, I had only seen clips, never a full movie. But I did have videos and a list of movies. I went through several mediums of reference, such as youtube, IMDb ratings, online forums, and more. I compiled a list of films that I believed would be of some aid to me. A majority of them were directed by or featured Jackie Chan, but I had a few from John Wu, and other non-Hong Kong directors. Once I refined my topic, I got to watching the films I thought relevant. These included Wheels on Meals, Project A, the Police Story trilogy, Rush Hour, Rumble in the Bronx, and Hard Boiled. As I watched each film, I took notes of notable moments, stylistic choices, and specific things I wanted to incorporate in my storyboard.
Once I had compiled the list of storybeats, moves, plot points, and ideas, it was time to write a preliminary script. There was no dialogue, so it was more of a textual storyboard. I made a table, and in each square added a panel number and bullet points of what was going on. My basic idea was to have the action split into several segments, each one in a separate location and indicating a shift in the story’s action. I ultimately cut it down to three, because five was both too complicated to write out, and would have lasted longer than five minutes. I chose a bus and a mall as my settings. From there, I chose my point A and point B: start on the bus, get separated and chased, end up at the mall food court. I established my moment-to-moment actions until I had a sizeable amount of panels to draw. From there, there was nothing left to do but draw.

Using Procreate on my Ipad with a stylus, I used a 6-panel page format, and began drawing each panel. I experimented with different styles of drawing to try to increase clarity, or to be more efficient. I also watched videos that explained the key aspects of storyboarding. The drawings had to be clear and convey the actions by representing the most important part of those few seconds. Each drawing had to be in a logical sequence, so that anyone could observe and infer the story unfolding. With my organization, this was not difficult, but it was without a doubt the most time-consuming part of the creative process.

Over the course of my research, I learned a lot about how Hong Kong cinema was filmed. Budget constraints, storytelling, and many other aspects of the film go into the decisions made. One interesting aspect I learned about was the setting. Hong Kong filmmakers did not have the budget of large Hollywood-backed studios. So when it came to settings, they were chosen for their practicality and space. For example, bars or large warehouses are easier to rent out or clear for a shoot, and provide large spaces for the talent, or objects such as tables, boxes, and other
environmental additions to incorporate into the action scenes. This results in the films feeling ‘down-to-Earth’, even if the action is over the top or crazy. No exotic locations, or out-of-this-world antics; just an average location with average people in a difficult situation.

Speaking of the environment, the props were perhaps the most unique and key aspect of the action. Props elevate the action and ground the talent in the scene. For example, in *Wheels on Meals*, Jackie dodges a kick from Urkides, whose kick expertly puts out a candelabra. This use of the candles, despite never being touched, is used to visually show a mastery of fighting styles. On the other hand, the talent may use a table to jump on/over or a bottle. In *Project A*, Jackie Chan uses the bicycle he is riding for both movements, blocking punches, and tripping other riders chasing him. The possibilities are endless, and so are the stunts. Incorporating these surroundings into the choreography is what makes the action so special, beyond just a martial art.

The story beats are simple, and yet this lends to the action as a whole. The audience is not meant to decipher or puzzle over questions of the plot. It would detract from the real value of these movies: the action. The plots follow simple, formulaic, but changeable story beats. Chase scenes, duels, and final encounters are all present. The story often comes down to the main character triumphing over crime. It starts small, with groups of petty thugs or a bad encounter. The endings are often the main character (and his partners) against the main bad guy, someone who has been mentioned throughout the film for being stronger, smarter, and all-around a threat to take seriously. This progression sets the final enemy, and the fight that ensues, apart from the cannon fodder stuntmen who are there to take hits and fall over one after the other.

Although I am pleased with how my storyboard turned out, there are a number of things I would change. These changes revolve mainly around my personal lack of professional
knowledge in certain areas. Originally, my idea was to do what is known in the industry as a “pre-visualization”, or pre-viz for short. A pre-viz, as I learned, is when the stunt performers act out the beats of the scene in its entirety, in a casual setting. It is essentially a recorded rehearsal, where the only difference between that and the real shots is the lack of costume, dialogue, or special lighting. The point of a pre-viz is to see the choreography in action, which helps the stunt coordinators and the director see how it will turn out, and make changes before the real takes. I, unfortunately, do not know Kung-Fu, so that option was off the table. Ideally, I and others would have been able to create this pre-viz, rather than sticking to a simple storyboard. Second, I underestimated the knowledge necessary to create good action. Although the storyboards of films or episodes are done by the writing team, in pre-production, it is entirely possible that the action itself happens during production. I realize now that, so long as I have no experience doing stunts, the quality and fluidity of my choreographed action will suffer.

I experienced some technical limitations during my project as well. Because I was working alone, I did not have other people at my disposal. The process of creating choreography involves multiple people. Not just the talent, but the stunt coordinator, safety personnel, director, etc. If I were to one day replicate this project as part of a professional project, I can imagine two hypothetical and ideal scenarios. The first would be me as a director. I would hire a stunt coordinator, a professional who specializes in leadership and stunt performing (the physical aspects). I would also hire a choreographer, someone more experienced with creating or planning dances, actions, etc. The crew who would do the stunts would also be found. Then, over the course of several days, I would convey my creative vision to the team, and assist them in practicing and developing the concrete action beats for the scene. Towards the end of the process, the stunt team would create and present to me a pre-viz, which the coordinator and I would
watch over and approve. From there, we would do multiple shoots, in costume, with proper
lighting and setting. The whole process, depending on the scene length, would take up to two
weeks. The other scenario is similar. I would be a stunt coordinator, someone with the experience
needed to create and choreograph a scene. I would pitch an action sequence to the director,
working around his creative vision and my expertise. The rest of the process would be the same.

Over the course of the semester, I learned a lot about what it takes to create a storyboard. I
developed my own process for creating a storyboard and learned many aspects of the Hong
Kong style of cinema. I hope to one day have the opportunity to participate in the creation of an
action sequence, or to try again at a storyboard once I have more professional experience. For
now, I’ll take the experiences I gained from this project and keep them close as I move on to
other projects.