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## THE TAO OF BWO: DELEUZIAN BECOMINGS IN KUNG FU CINEMA

Amir Vodka (University of Amsterdam)

Kung fu cinema is no longer a specifically Chinese genre, neither is it solely Asian. Big budget blockbusters such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (*Wo hu cang long*, 2000), the *Rush Hour* series (1998, 2001, 2007), *Kill Bill* (2003, 2004) and many others demonstrate that kung fu today represents a dominant form of action which is not confined to a specific region or culture. As *The Matrix* trilogy (1999, 2003) suggests, kung fu is not just a fighting technique, but the main way of seeing, thinking and functioning in the near future world. While keeping in mind the Chinese origins of kung fu, this paper asks to explore kung fu cinema through the philosophy of Taoism, a Chinese philosophy that influenced both practical and cinematic kung fu to a great extent. However, the reading I am offering here takes the philosophical perspective of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who created their own understanding of Tao and integrated it into their unique conceptual world. I do not ask to offer a comparative analysis of Deleuzian philosophy and Taoism (which would be counterproductive from a Deleuzian perspective as it would go against the Deleuzian sensitivity to difference), but to complement them as *yin* and *yang* complement each other by constantly creating something new. I find Deleuze's thought most suitable for a philosophy of kung fu cinema first of all because of its emphasis on movement, and secondly because of its deterritorializing force, which opens Western philosophy to new directions. Deleuze's thought is connected to a specific line of thinkers in the Western history of philosophy, which since Plato is dominated by a logocentric, metaphysical thinking that seeks to establish truth in being and identity. Philosophers to whom Deleuze related himself, such as Nietzsche and Bergson, were seekers of another truth — that of life as change, movement and becoming. These philosophers were rare in the Western tradition, which seem to have repressed its pre-Socratic past. For Deleuze it was natural then to seek an alliance with Eastern thought, which never ceased to be a philosophy of becoming. Indeed, while Deleuze and Guattari view transcendence as "a specifically European disease,"<sup>1</sup> they recognized the Chinese Tao as "an

intensive body without organs [...] a field of immanence in which desire lacks nothing and therefore cannot be linked to any external or transcendent criterion."<sup>2</sup>

I turn to Deleuze and Guattari in order to find possible answers to the following questions: Why do so many kung fu masters appear to be masochists? Why do so many cinematic and real kung fu fighters adopt animal styles? What is the philosophy behind the recent trend of virtual kung fu films, and what is the point in kung-fu hand-to-hand battles in a virtual world dominated by technology? Through various examples taken from highlights of kung fu cinema I attempt to demonstrate the relationship between Deleuze and Guattari's concept of body without organs (BwO) and Taoism. In the first part of this paper I draw a theoretical link between the Deleuzian BwO and Tao's concept of emptiness. In order to make themselves a BwO, Kung fu masters often pass through a stage of what appears as masochism. The second part of this paper deals with this apparent masochistic tendency and its justifications from a Deleuzian/Taoist perspective. Deleuze and Guattari's concept of BwO is by definition a process of becoming. Deleuze and Guattari describe many becomings, all connected to each other on a scale of becoming: "On the near side, we encounter becomings-woman, becomings-child [...]. On the far side, we find becoming-elementary, -cellular, -molecular, and even becoming-imperceptible."<sup>3</sup> The third part of this paper examines the recurrent theme of becoming-animal in kung fu cinema, while the fourth and last part deals with the notion of perceiving the imperceptible in contemporary virtual kung fu cinema.

## THE TAO OF BWO

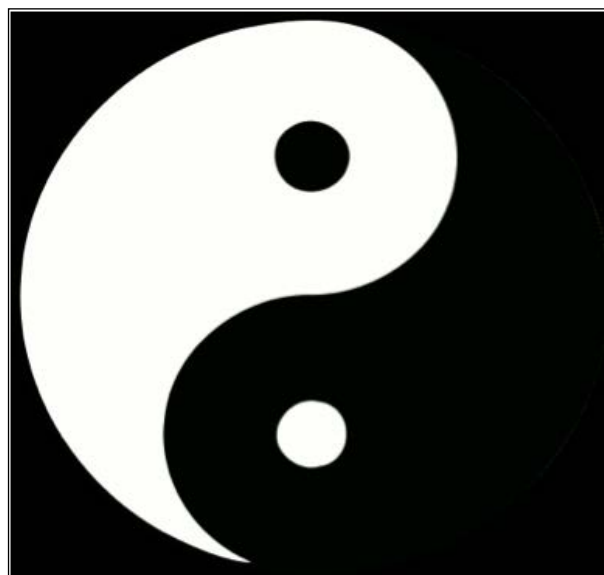
Deleuze and Guattari described the body without organs as "nonstratified, unformed, intense matter, the matrix of intensity, intensity = 0."<sup>4</sup> This zero is a plane which renders forms (organs) formless. "The organs distribute themselves on the BwO, but they distribute themselves independently of the form of the organism; forms become contingent, organs are no longer anything more than intensities that are produced, flows, thresholds, and gradients."<sup>5</sup> The BwO is not opposed to the organs *per se* but to the organization of the organs in a form which imposes an identity that restricts the becoming of the body (as for instance, the human form prevents a becoming-animal).<sup>6</sup> In *Anti-Oedipus* Deleuze and

Guatarri dehumanize the body and describe it in machinic terms according to which everything is a machine, everything is a multiplicity of machines. The mouth for instance is an eating machine, a speaking machine and a breathing machine. One machine is always attached to another in an endless process of coupling. A mouth machine is attached to a breast machine, a flow producing machine (milk, but also desire and capital) and a machine which connects to it and draws a portion of the flow: "For every organ-machine, an energy-machine: all the time, flows and interruptions."<sup>7</sup> The BwO works with the organs as a connection of organ-machines and desire-machines which makes the body an open experiment in constant flow, but it can also work against the organs when they organize to a fixed form which arrests the possibility of becoming. On the one hand, the plane of organization endlessly labors on the BwO, trying to arrest the lines of flight, stop the deterritorialization of the body and form a subject in a depth dimension. The BwO or the plane of consistency, on the other hand, pulls itself from the organized body and its points of reference, releasing particles from the territories of type and species. The BwO is a smooth body like an egg, sterile and shapeless. It is the platform on which — or more accurately, through which — the organ-machines exist. Strictly speaking, the BwO is not a support for things to pass, but what causes them to pass not as forms but as intensities. "A BwO is made in such a way that it can be occupied, populated only by intensities. Only intensities pass and circulate."<sup>8</sup> In a way, the BwO is equivalent to the unconscious, but contrary to the Freudian unconscious it is not a metaphor (a sign denoting something else) but an empirical reality. It is not a transcendent idea, far and external, nor a deep and internal essence, but immanent metaphysics or matter itself — before its solidification into shapes and organs.

Taoism forms its own kind of BwO. *Tao* translates as "the way," that is, a plane of movement, which is defined by Lao Tzu (or Lao Zi) in the central text of Taoist philosophy, the *Tao Te Ching*, as "the shape that has no shape, the image that is without substance."<sup>9</sup> The Tao is conceptualized as emptiness which is the generative ontological process through which all things arise and pass away. Emptiness in Tao should not be confused with lack as it actually means fullness. According to Lao Tzu "the way is empty, yet use will not drain it."<sup>10</sup> Chuan Tzu (Zhuang Zi) asks, "What can be poured into without ever overflowing? What can be drawn from without ever emptying?"<sup>11</sup> This is the Tao. Once we inhabit the sourceless source of it, we are no longer a concrete form ("man," "woman" or even "human") but what

Deleuze and Guattari call “haecceity,” subjectless intensities that spin out of the BwO without ever actualizing an organism. The notion of *tzu-jan* comes here as an occurrence appearing of itself, a self emerging order. The “ten thousand things” (a Chinese phrase to denote the infinite multitude of life) unfold spontaneously from the generative force of Tao, each according to its own nature. The (re)creation of this Taoist BwO is what Taoism calls *wu-wei* — emptiness’ own doing, acting as a spontaneous part of *tzu-jan* rather than with self-conscious intention. As David Hinton explains, “It is the movement of *tzu-jan*, when we act according to *wu-wei* we act as the generative force itself.”<sup>12</sup>

The main problem Taoism asked to confront is dualistic thinking. The dualism-machine is not only formed of two opposing terms, but in fact relies on a third term, a transcendent principle of judgment, which gives positive value to one side of the opposition while devaluating the other. Truth and man, for instance, are valued positively over the false and the woman via a third term which judges the opposition, such as the idea of self-identical being. The dualism-machine forms a triangle where each term in the opposition relates to its opposite through the third term which gives value to the whole system from a higher or deeper plane. Tao forms a completely different machine: a circle with two complementary sides (two interconnected opposites), each with the other at its center. In Taoism, man and woman or heaven and earth do not represent an opposition but a relation in movement, symbolized by the *yin* and *yang* which are the interrelated feminine and masculine forces of the universe.



Every aspect of life is governed by this relation — the tides of the sea, breathing, the cycle of life and death. According to Taoism, *yin* and *yang* do not create an opposition, but are rather conceptualized as interdependent forces. As can be seen in the *yin-yang* symbol, a little *yang* dot appears at the center of the *yin* and a little *yin* dot appears at the center of the *yang*. This indicates that each term on its own does not have an essence within itself, but rather have the other at its center, as each term's self-identity is in the field of the other. According to Peter Payne, concerning the principle of *yin-yang* circulation in martial arts, *yin* and *yang* are not related by a procedure of dialectics: 'this integrated state is not simply a balance or alteration between two separate functions; it is not "half one, half the other" or "first one, then the other,"<sup>13</sup> but rather the emergence of a new kind of energy, a new principle, which is a generating force in itself (*tzu-jan*). The *yin-yang* symbol should actually be rotating in order to show *yin* and *yang* in their ceaseless active alteration, as in natural cyclic processes. Lao Tzu stressed this interrelation throughout *Tao Te Ching*: "Is not the way [Tao] like the stretching of a bow? The high it presses down, the low it lifts up [...] 'Bowed down then preserved; Bent then straight; Hollow then full; Worn then new [...]'<sup>14</sup> The heavy is the root of the light; the still is the root of the restless [...]," etc.<sup>15</sup> There is no relation here to any third fixed term which serves as an external criterion, but only a constant movement of opposing terms which push each other, replace each other and give birth to each other while spinning opposites beyond opposition. What would be seen if the *yin-yang* symbol would rotate is the dissolving of the *yin* and *yang* into a shapeless circle without contours: the total emptiness of Tao.

According to Deleuze and Guattari the BwO has two phases, "one phase is for the fabrication of the BwO, the other to make something circulate on it or pass across it."<sup>16</sup> The first phase of making a Tao BwO is the destruction of the dualistically organized body. The second phase is the circulation of intensities, the motion of *yin* and *yang* which flow on the smooth surface of the BwO as pure intensities. The BwO is a zero without negativity, without opposites at all, but it is at the same time the motion reactor of organs which spin on it as pure lines of movement or formless intensities (that can nonetheless form into an organism). The way of Tao is to go beyond, or more accurately — before the dualism appears and organizes the body in a state of binary opposition (for instance, the organs of woman or the organs of man). As Chuang Tzu said: "Life is born of death, and death of life [...] Where *that*

and *this* cease to be opposites, you'll find the hinge of the way. Keep that hinge at the center of things, and your movements are inexhaustible."<sup>17</sup>

In *A Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze and Guattari refer to Tao in a passage that describes a Japanese compilation of Chinese Taoist sex:

We see in it the formation of a circuit of intensities between female and male energy, with the woman playing the role of the innate or instinctive force (Yin) stolen by or transmitted to the man in such a way that the transmitted force of the man (Yang) in turn becomes innate, all the more innate: an augmentation of powers. The condition for this circulation and multiplication is that the man not ejaculate. It is not a question of experiencing desire as an internal lack, nor of delaying pleasure in order to produce a kind of externalizable surplus value, but instead of constituting an intensive body without organs, Tao, a field of immanence in which desire lacks nothing and therefore cannot be linked to any external or transcendent criterion.<sup>18</sup>

Unlike other machines which gather energy to a maximum point which results in emission (the sexual reproduction machine for instance), the Tao machine in principle never releases its energy, but keeps circulating the flows of desire in a field of immanence. In this way, the exchange of yin and yang will not produce a discharge but a BwO, which is a "plane of consistency proper to desire."<sup>19</sup> The BwO is in conflict with the plane of organization — which Deleuze and Guattari also call "a teleological plan(e)" and "a plan(e) of transcendence," a plane of "forms and their developments, and subjects and their formations" that relies on transcendent unity or a hidden principle.<sup>20</sup> The BwO, in contrast, is plane of consistency or composition, "a plane of immanence and univocalité" in which 'form is constantly being dissolved, freeing times and speed."<sup>21</sup>

The influence of Taoism on the field of Chinese warfare is evident already in Sun Tzu's (or Sunzi) military treatise *Art of War*, in which he often relates to the Tao of warfare: various military aspects which he explains according to the Taoist *yin* and *yang* principle of active alteration and interdependence. As Sun Tzu writes, "chaos is given birth from control; fear is given birth from courage; weakness is given birth from strength";<sup>22</sup> because warfare is "the Way [Tao] of deception," the army must always retain the movement of alteration between these terms.<sup>23</sup> The battle field is in a state of flux and constant change, and therefore "a

victorious battle [strategy] is not repeated, the configurations of response [to the enemy] are inexhaustible.”<sup>24</sup> The virtual field of inexhaustible movements corresponds to what may be called Sun Tzu’s military BwO. This Taoist war-machine is powerful because it is formless. As Sun Tzu wrote, “The pinnacle of military deployment approaches the formless. If it is formless, then even the deepest spy cannot discern it or the wise make plans against it.”<sup>25</sup> The Tao war-machine should be like water: a formless matter that can take all forms. As Sun Tzu had put it, “Water has no constant shape. One who is able to change and transform in accord with the enemy and wrest victory is termed spiritual!”<sup>26</sup>

Sun Tzu’s warfare principles are applicable to the smaller scale of kung fu fighting, which focuses on the individual’s body rather than the military organization. This can be attested by the writings of Bruce Lee, who was not only a major kung fu cinema performer, but also a gifted theoretician of modern day martial arts. His own kung fu “system” *Jeet Kune Do* (JKD actually rejects any one method, style, school or any constant strategic configuration of power) was developed as a practical way to survive in a battle, incorporating even “dirty” street-fight maneuvers in order to achieve this goal. In his book *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*, Lee describes the proper state of mind of the kung fu practitioner as a zone of “voidness” or “thusness.” He describes it as

that which stands right in the middle between this and that. The void is all-inclusive, having no opposite — there is nothing which it excludes or opposes. It is living void, because all forms come out of it and whoever realizes the void is filled with life and power and the love of all beings.<sup>27</sup>

This theoretical discourse acquires a very practical meaning in a kung fu battle, where one can react to the attacks of her/his foe as an organism which gathers movement to the point of emission in a form of counter-attack, or as Lee suggests, never release the energy in a formed blow or kick but keep circulating it, “instead of creating resistance, enter straight into the movement as it arises.”<sup>28</sup> In order to enter straight into movement Lee recommends to “know the emptiness and tranquility of your mind. Be empty; have no style or form for the opponent to work on.”<sup>29</sup> During a battle the mind should be in emptiness, without distinction of “I” and “other.” Being selfless in battle gives the opponent nothing to strike against and opens an infinite field of possible movements. The practitioner of kung fu should

enter into a state prior to the formation of organs; a priority which is not precisely chronological as logical, for this state is actually one with the organs. As Deleuze and Guattari wrote, “we treat the BwO as the full egg before the extension of the organism and the organization of the organs, before the formation of the strata,”<sup>30</sup> but at the same time, “The egg is the BwO. The BwO is not ‘before’ the organism; it is adjacent to it and is continually in the process of constructing itself.”<sup>31</sup> Emptiness does not mean that the organs cease to exist but that they are no longer organized, and hence can move freely with the changing conditions of the battle field.

#### KUNG FU MASOCHISM

In *A Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze and Guattari ask: “is the Tao masochistic?”<sup>32</sup> If judgment could be made based on kung fu films, the answer would be definitely yes. In each of his four official films, Bruce Lee goes into his most intense state only after his bare chest receives a few bleeding scars. Only then, one sees the true wrath of Lee. When Lee tastes the blood from his scars, it seems as if he was waiting for this moment of pain in order to transform into a pure energetic state. In other cases we see a young kung fu apprentice who, in order to become a master, is put through the harshest physical training. Other examples include Jackie Chan, tortured by his mentor in *Drunken Master* (*Jui kuen*, 1978), or Gordon Liu going through severe physical pain tests in *The 36<sup>th</sup> Chamber of Shaolin* (*Shao Lin san shi liu fang*, 1978). In other instances we see kung fu masters placed in complete physical restraint, for instance — the hero of *The Delightful Forest* (*Kuai huo lin*, 1972) who goes throughout the entire film with hands chained to a heavy wooden plate which is placed around his neck, or Jet Li tied to a leash like a dog in *Unleashed* (2005). Why all this pain, torture and restraint? Or in Deleuze and Guattari’s words, relating to masochists and other suffering bodies without organs: “why these examples, why must we start here? Emptied bodies instead of full ones. What happened?”<sup>33</sup>

As Deleuze and Guattari explain, “The masochist uses suffering as a way of constituting a body without organs and bringing forth a plane of consistency of desire.”<sup>34</sup> Desire is the opposite of pleasure, a field of immanence opposed to the search for pleasure, which is “an affection of a person or a subject; it is the only way for persons to ‘find themselves’ in the

process of desire that exceeds them; pleasures, even the most artificial, are reterritorializations.”<sup>35</sup> According to Deleuze and Guattari, there is no outside to the masochistic desire, and hence it is necessary for the masochist “to annul the organs, to shut them away so that their liberated elements can enter into the new relations.”<sup>36</sup> In Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching* it is said that in order to achieve the Tao it is necessary to “[b]lock the openings, shut the doors.”<sup>37</sup> Many kung fu styles follow this advice and advocate the minimum moves possible — the closer you get to complete immobility the better. In the words of Tai Chi Master Kuo Ling Ying: “Big moves are not as polished as short moves. Short moves are not as polished as stillness.”<sup>38</sup> Wu Sung (Lung Ti) from *The Delightful Forest* and Danny (Jet Li) in *Unleashed* are interesting cases: The more their physical movement is limited, the stronger they become. Danny, however, is closer to what Deleuze and Guattari described as the Confucian version of a BwO, one that circulates desire in order to emit it at the right moment — the “procreative ends,” which in Danny’s case amounts to beating up whoever his gangster boss and owner Bart (Bob Hoskins) wishes to hurt. The similarity between Danny and the Confucian BwO is the patriarchal law which governs the flow of energy — this is the function of Bart, the only person that can control Danny’s wild energy by tying or untying his leash (every time the leash is untied Danny bursts into a violent fit of destructive kung fu).

But this is true only for one side of the assemblage of desire, the side facing the strata, organisms, State, family [...]. It is not true for the other side, the Tao side of destratification that draws a plane of consistency proper to desire.<sup>39</sup>

This other side is represented by Wu Sung in *The Delightful Forest*, which circulates desire only on the immanent plane of his tied up body, without ever emitting it for external purposes. Danny’s constraints hold him closed upon himself in what seems to be a gathering of energy waiting to explode. He is most dangerous when unleashed, but tied up he is nothing but a harmless puppy. Wu Sung in contrast prefers to stay tied up, and exactly in this state he is most powerful. Wu Sung rejects the authority of the state strata (represented in the film by the military government) and parallel to that he denies his own organs, which are held tied throughout most of the film. The military officials who chain him, lock him in a prison, deny him food and beat him up, only increase Wu Sung’s strength (he kills dozens

with hands tied up, using only the big wooden plate that binds his body). The military commander finally devises a plan: to release Wu Sung and treat him like a king, to give him convenience, luxurious foods and wine. What can you do against the masochistic BwO? Give him pleasure.

Why, then, does Bruce Lee always need to bleed before entering his most intense state? It is not what psychoanalysis might interpret as a relation of phallic potency to castration (that might well be Rambo's case), but a degree of destruction towards the organized body in order to open up to a larger field of becoming. The BwO is defined by its connectivity ("connection of desires, conjunction of flows, continuum of intensities"<sup>40</sup>) which is not that of a self, "for it is not 'my' body without organs, instead the 'me' (moi) is on it."<sup>41</sup> In Bruce Lee's words,

It is not, "I am doing this," but rather, an inner realization that "this is happening through me," or "it is doing this for me." The consciousness of self is the greatest hindrance to the proper execution of all physical action.<sup>42</sup>

Where psychoanalysis says "Stop, find your self again," the schizoanalytic logic of the kung fu master therefore says "Let's go further still, we haven't found our BwO yet, we haven't sufficiently dismantled our self."<sup>43</sup> According to Bruce Lee, "[p]unches and kicks are tools to kill the ego";<sup>44</sup> and so, in the final duel of *Enter the Dragon* (1973) Lee fights his enemy in a room full of mirrors while smashing his own reflections, for the real enemy to dismantle is the self.<sup>45</sup>

## BECOMING ANIMAL

Once a BwO is formed — through masochism or by other means — one is by definition in a process of becoming. There are many possible becomings, many possible ways to move and play with the organs once they are free of the occupation forces of the organized body. A recurrent theme in kung fu cinema is becoming-animal. Many kung fu film titles feature animals: *Deadly Mantis* (*Tang lang*, 1978), *The Thundering Mantis* (*Dian tang lang*, 1980), *Snake in the Eagles shadow* (*Se ying diu sau*, 1978), *Snake in the Monkey's Shadow* (*Hou hsing kou shou*,

1979), *Mad Monkey Kung Fu* (Feng hou, 1979), *Five Deadly Venoms* (Wu du, 1978), *Iron Monkey* (Siu Nin Wong Fei Hung Chi: Tit Ma Lau, 1993) and countless more. Many kung fu styles involve a becoming animal. The Shaolin developed five animal styles: the dragon, snake, tiger, leopard and crane. Sometimes two animals or more are combined as in the tiger-crane style; and even in styles which are not animal based, one can find animal maneuvers or postures such as the very basic horse stance.

Becoming-animal should not be confused with an imitation of an animal. As Deleuze and Guattari write:

Becoming is not to imitate or identify with something or someone [...]. Starting from the forms one has, the subject one is, the organs one has, or the functions one fulfills, becoming is to extract particles between which one establishes the relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness that are *closest* to what one is becoming, and through which one becomes.<sup>46</sup>

Becoming is not a leap from one being to another, as the prince becomes a frog. Becoming is the movement between the terms which emits certain molecules of speed and slowness, singularities that are not reducible to persons and individuals. Furthermore, Deleuze and Guattari stress that "Becoming-animal are neither dreams nor phantasies. They are perfectly real [...]. What is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which that which becomes passes."<sup>47</sup> One does not turn into an animal, leaving her/his human form behind, but in becoming-animal one moves between the terms as that movement itself. Becoming dragon in kung fu, for instance, is followed by a hissing sound that is emitted by the practitioner, releasing a sound of a dragon which re-arranges the whole body assemblage to something which is neither man nor dragon, but the block of movement between them. The white crane practitioner's hands extract the movement of the long beak of the crane, as the practitioner raises his hands in pecking positions while concentrating on head shots, the crane's favorite point of attack. Becoming is a multiplicity by definition, and "[e]ach multiplicity is symbiotic; its becoming ties together animals, plants, microorganisms, mad particles, a whole galaxy."<sup>48</sup> By entering a block of becoming with an animal one enters an assemblage with its surroundings and the symbiotic relations it has with it. The monkey style practitioner enters into a relationship with trees, masterfully

hanging and bouncing between them. When in *Drunken Master* Wong Fei Hong's (Jackie Chan) father say that his son "is nothing more than a wild animal," he means it allegorically as saying "my son behaves *like* a wild animal." But Fei Hong's becoming-animal has nothing to do with imitation or identification; his becoming "is not a correspondence between relations,"<sup>49</sup> but *a zone of proximity*, "a notion, at once topological and quantal, that marks a belonging to the same molecule, independently of the subjects considered and the forms determined."<sup>50</sup> When Jackie Chan is becoming a monkey it is not just acting like a monkey or imitating one, but entering a zone of proximity with a monkey which releases monkey molecules in Chan's body. This is not an allegory or a phantasy. As Chan's legs and back bend and his hands loosen, he enters the speed and balance of a monkey. Without being a real monkey, nor a human for that matter — the reality of becoming is the movement between the terms ("There is a reality of becoming-animal, even though one does not in reality become animal").<sup>51</sup>

Deleuze and Guattari distinguish between three kinds of animals: individuated animals — "family pets, sentimental, Oedipal animals [...]"; animals with characteristics or attributes — "genus, classification, or state animals"; and demonic animals — "pack or affect animals that form a multiplicity, a becoming, a population."<sup>52</sup> Jackie Chan as Fei Hong clearly falls in the third category, while a kung fu practicing animal like the panda bear in *Kung Fu Panda* (2008) clearly belongs within the first and second categories: an "all too human" animal, an anthropomorphic imitation of human qualities. Deleuze and Guattari write that "[y]ou become animal only molecularly. You do not become a barking molar dog, but by barking, if it is done with enough feeling, with enough necessity and composition, you emit a molecular dog [...] all becomings are molecular."<sup>53</sup> Kung fu panda, in contrast, is a molar animal, an imitation of a human being. It is a personified representation of an animal, whereas a becoming-animal is always multiple and independent of subjects. Bruce Lee is not identifying with a cat but is becoming-cat. His famous high pitched howls are not an imitation of cat's howls but an intensity which comes to proximity with a cat, releasing cat molecules of flexibility and elusiveness. In Lee's case this becoming sometimes takes monstrous proportions, as he becomes more of a demon than an animal (see for instance the blood-spattered final duel of *The Big Boss*). Like the case of Gregor Samsa in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, becoming often takes the shape of a monster "because it is accompanied, at its origin as in its undertaking, by a rupture with the central institutions that have established

themselves or seek to become established.”<sup>54</sup> As becoming embarks a line of flight, one never knows where it will end.<sup>55</sup> The protagonist of *The Thundering Mantis* gets so carried away with becoming a praying mantis, that in the final scene he actually eats his opponent (the American tag-line for the film was aptly *Mad, Bad and Insane*).

## VIRTUAL KUNG FU

According to Deleuze and Guattari, on the “the far side” of becoming we find becoming-elementary, -cellular, -molecular, and even becoming-imperceptible.<sup>56</sup> “The imperceptible,” as they write, “is the immanent end of becoming, its cosmic formula.”<sup>57</sup> Kung fu cinema has reached this stage with what may be called virtual kung fu, most famously exemplified in *The Matrix*. What I call cinema of “virtual kung fu” does not necessarily deal with virtual reality in its content, but includes any film which incorporates a “virtual style,” for instance *Romeo Must Die* (2000), *The One* (2001), and other recent kung fu films which use digital animation in order to take the viewers both to molecular and cosmic dimensions of reality. *Romeo Must Die*, for instance, features the effect of digitally animated zoom-in into bodies which receive a blow, exposing their internal injuries on a molecular level. *The One* presents the cosmic dimension of the virtual with what the film calls “The Multiverse,” a sort of a plane of consistency which gathers all parallel universes.

The concept of the virtual in Deleuze’s philosophy is not to be confused with virtual reality. As Slavoj Žižek describes it,

Virtual Reality in itself is a rather miserable idea: that of imitating reality, of reproducing its experience in an artificial medium. The reality of the Virtual, on the other hand, stands for the reality of the Virtual as such, for its real effects and consequences.<sup>58</sup>

In Deleuzian terms, the virtual is not at all in opposition to “real,” but to the actual. The virtual is not a substitute for the real, an imitation of the real, but as Brian Massumi explains, “the virtual is the mode of reality implicated in the emergence of new potentials. In other words, its reality is the reality of change: the event.”<sup>59</sup> While the actual expresses states of affairs and beings on a plane of organization, the virtual expresses incorporeal events,

singularities and becomings on a plane of consistency. The actual, nonetheless, stems from the virtual, yet the virtual is always more than its actualization — a pool of potentialities which are selected but never exhausted by the actual. The virtual in this sense is the *durée* and *élan vital* of the real. The virtual dimension of the body is the BwO.

It seems odd that in the extremely technological world portrayed in *The Matrix*, the war against the machines takes the form of kung fu hand-to-hand combat. One would expect to see Neo (Keanu Reeves) learning how to hack computers, or shoot a gun and use explosives, but the first thing he learns after waking up in “the desert of the real” is kung fu. Kung fu might be inferior to a gun in the real world, but according to *The Matrix* it is the most suitable form of survival in the virtual, because the virtual is where movement can be perceived. Deleuze and Guattari say two seemingly contradictory things on the perception of movement: on the one hand it cannot be perceived, as “perception can grasp movement only as the displacement of a moving body or the development of a form” (that is, according to what Bergson defined as false time, which replaces duration with space to cover); but on the other hand — they write — “movement also ‘must’ be perceived, it cannot but be perceived.”<sup>60</sup> As we see in *The Matrix*, regular people who live in the virtual reality generated by the matrix perceive according to the narrow limits that the matrix dictates. Their perspective is restricted to the strata, from which perception perceives only beings and measured time (the false substitute of real movement, which according to Bergson is undivided duration). The kung fu master, however, is a BwO that can plug into the matrix as the virtual dimension of time or a plane of consistency, and therefore can see through the illusion of the strata and perceive pure durations.

Deleuze and Guattari write that “movements, becomings, in other words, pure relations of speed and slowness, pure affects, are below and above the threshold of perception.”<sup>61</sup> The movement of a flying bullet is above the threshold of normal perception, but the kung fu master in *The Matrix* can perceive this movement (and so can the spectators, with the help of the “bullet time” digital effect). The flying bullet has its own duration or becoming. As Deleuze and Guattari write “there is a reality specific to becoming (the Bergsonian idea of a coexistence of very different ‘durations,’ superior or inferior to ‘ours,’ all of them in communication).”<sup>62</sup> The kung fu master perceives the superior duration of the bullet (superior in the sense of being too fast, above the threshold of normal perception) because for him/her all durations coexist on a shared plane of consistency. The digital effects of *The*

*Matrix* exemplify this notion in battle scenes where we see two or more durations at once: The way Neo perceives the fight, movements are too slow (leaving enough time to dodge a speeding bullet), but for his foe, Neo's movements are too fast to perceive. The film thus functions as a plane of consistency which gathers durations which are at once too slow and too fast, and hence is "precisely where the imperceptible is seen and heard."<sup>63</sup>

*The Matrix* contains a tension between two conceptions of "the one," and two conceptions of "the whole," as closed or open. Becoming, by definition is a (de)composition of the whole. However, the Deleuzian whole should not be understood as transcendent plane, a meta-term, or the sum of all parts. This would be The One, while the Deleuzian whole is more like the Taoist zero. The Deleuzian whole is not based on the phallic notion of the self-identical One that is closed upon itself. On the contrary: the whole is what connects everything through openness and becoming. Discussing the whole in cinematic terms, Deleuze writes in *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* that the whole

is not a set and does not have parts. It is rather that which prevents each set, however big it is, from closing in on itself, and that which forces it to extend itself into a larger set. The whole is therefore like a thread which traverses sets and gives each one the possibility, which is necessarily realized, of communicating with another, to infinity. Thus the whole is the Open, and relates back to time or even to spirit rather than to content and to space.<sup>64</sup>

Deleuze refers to the whole as the set of sets, the frame itself, which is not what closes the set on itself, but on the contrary — connects every set to every other. The whole is the deterritorialization of the image. In *The Matrix* we see a tension between the whole as a Deleuzian/Taoist concept of immanence without exteriority on the one hand, and the dualist approach which polarizes the real and the virtual on the other hand (while in Deleuze's philosophy the virtual *is* real). The "one" in *The Matrix* is located in-between molar identities and molecular multiplicities. Neo is regarded as The One, a unique subject of history in the same sense that messianic religions refer to the Savior (Neo is even "crucified" and sacrificed for the salvation of humanity at the end of *The Matrix Revolutions*). However, Neo is not really The One which signifies an exclusive unity, but he is rather an inclusive multiplicity which moves through the oppositions of real and virtual, man and machine, while uniting

these terms on a shared plane of becoming. Agent Smith (Hugo Weaving) represents the truly molar One, endlessly duplicating himself in others as a repetition of the same (*The Matrix Revolutions*). Neo's "oneness," in contrast, is in fact the "zeroness" of the BwO, the Open Whole which connects all worlds while maintaining their differences.

In the final moments of the trilogy, Neo is blinded, and only then he can see the spiritual reality of the virtual for what it is: moving lines of light, the molecular movement of duration. *The Matrix* portrays the virtual as an abstract plane, comprised solely of codes. The ability of kung fu cinema to visualize the imperceptible (pure movement) was always connected to the ability to construct an abstract plane as the whole on which the imperceptible is perceived.<sup>65</sup> The abstract plane is any plane-what-ever that can trace movements. Deleuze and Guatari often describe it as a plane of writing, music and philosophy. It is no accident that kung fu is often compared to these planes. In *The Twin Dragons* (*Seong lung wui*, 1992), for instance, Jackie Chan plays two roles of twin brothers — one is a classical music conductor and pianist and the other a martial arts expert; one is playing music and the other is fighting, while the jump cut editing between the scenes creates a linkage between the choreographed, ballet like kung fu movements and a plane of composition or music. Kung fu masters in *Hero* (*Ying xiong*, 2002) are also calligraphy experts, presenting kung fu as a writing plane. Yuen Woo-ping (director of *Drunken Master* and choreographer of *The Matrix*, *Kill Bill* and more), points to kung fu as a plane of thought in his film *Tai Chi Fist* (*Tai ji: Zhang san feng*, 1993). The film opens with a kung fu master who decides to leave the martial arts world, but is confronted by another master who is eager to know who is better. The master suggests that instead of a physical battle they will perform the duel with words, and so each one in turn announces his move instead of actualizing it, until one is declared the winner. Almost a decade before *The Matrix* depicted a world where the true battle occurs in the head, Woo-ping determined that kung fu is a virtual or abstract plain of thought.

The correlation of the moving body-image-thought appears most strongly in Tsui Hark's *Once Upon a Time in China* (*Wong Fei Hung*, 1991). The film takes place in 19th century Canton, which is under Western occupation. Wong Fei Hong (Jet Li) takes a traditional stance towards Western technology, and like Neo, he is fighting soldiers armed with guns with his bare hands. The only Western technology Fei Hong is willing to adopt is the film camera, in order to capture the movements of his kung fu maneuvers (thus creating the very first kung

fu film). The final duel scene shows Fei Hong shooting a bullet from his bare hand, piercing a hole in the head of his colonial Western foe. For director Tsui Hark, kung fu is a superior technology to guns since it is a virtual technology of the mind (a point made clear by the bullet penetrating the colonizer's head). Not accidentally the final chamber in the 36<sup>th</sup> *Chamber of Shaolin*, "the most advanced field of martial arts," is dedicated to the study of philosophy.

This essay attempted to explore kung fu not just as a fighting technique but as a mode of perception and thought, an image of film and mind. Through kung fu cinema I asked to underline a relationship between the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari and Taoism, established by a link between the concept of the BwO, which Deleuze and Guattari describe as the zero degree of intensity, and Tao's concept of emptiness. Many kung fu masters use masochism in order to dismantle the self, thereby constituting themselves as a BwO on a plane of consistency. This, by definition, is a process of becoming, which in many cases turns to a becoming-animal. On the far side of this process we find a becoming which is molecular, cosmic and imperceptible. Virtual kung fu cinema reached this level as a plane through which the imperceptible (duration) can be perceived. As a virtual form of combat, kung fu is the most suitable art of survival in the contemporary world which is composed of abstract codes of thought. Instead of the virtual body understood as disembodiment, kung fu cinema offers the virtual body as a fully embodied BwO.

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1. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (New York: Continuum, 2004), 20.

2. *Ibid.*, 174.

3. *Ibid.*, 274.

4. *Ibid.*, 169.

5. *Ibid.*, 182.

6. "The BwO is not opposed to the organs; rather, the BwO and its 'true organs,' which must be composed and positioned, are opposed to the organism, the organic organization of the organs." — *ibid.*, 176.

7. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 1.

8. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 169.

9. Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. D.C. Lau (London: Penguin Books, 1963), 18.

10. *Ibid.*, 8.

11. Chuang Tzu, *The Essential Chuang Tzu*, trans. Sam Hamill and J. P. Seaton (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1999), 125.

12. Quoted in Chuang Tzu, *The Inner Chapters*, trans. David Hinton (New York: Counterpoint, 1998), 119.

13. Peter Payne, *Martial Arts: The Spiritual Dimension* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), 9.
14. Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, 27.
15. *Ibid.*, 31.
16. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 168.
17. Tzu, *The Inner Chapters*, 22.
18. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 174.
19. *Ibid.*
20. On the relation to and negation of the BwO in theology, specifically in a Christian context, see Maximilian De Gaynesford, "Bodily Organs and Organisation," in *Deleuze and Religion*, ed. Mary Bryden (London: Routledge, 2001), 87-98.
21. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 294.
22. Sun Tzu, "Art of War," in *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China*, trans. Ralph D. Sawyer (Colorado: Westview Press, 1993), 165.
23. *Ibid.*, 158.
24. *Ibid.*, 168.
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*
27. Bruce Lee, *Tao of Jeet Kune Do* (California: Ohara Publications, 2006), 7.
28. *Ibid.*, 18.
29. *Ibid.*, 21.
30. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 170.
31. *Ibid.*, 182.
32. *Ibid.*, 174.
33. *Ibid.*, 167.
34. *Ibid.*, 172.
35. *Ibid.*, 173.
36. *Ibid.*, 287.
37. Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, 59.
38. David Chow and Richard Spangler, *Kung Fu: History, Philosophy and Technique* (California: Unique Publications, 1982), 31.
39. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 174.
40. *Ibid.*, 179.
41. *Ibid.*
42. Lee, *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*, 7.
43. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 167.
44. Lee, *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*, 13.
45. This final duel scene can also be related to what Deleuze described as a "crystal image": an actual image which has a virtual image that corresponds to it like a double or a reflection. "It is as if an image in a mirror, a photo or a postcard came to life, assumed independence and passed into the actual, even if this meant that the actual image returned into the mirror and resumed its place in the postcard or photo, following a double movement of liberation and capture." Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1989), 68.
46. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 300.
47. *Ibid.*, 262.
48. *Ibid.*, 275.
49. *Ibid.*, 262.
50. *Ibid.*, 301.
51. *Ibid.*, 302.
52. *Ibid.*, 265.
53. *Ibid.*, 303.
54. *Ibid.*, 272.
55. *Ibid.*, 274. To be precise, becoming is not a free-floating weightlessness, but a process which is determined by specific bodies, their movements and their intensities. Nonetheless, becoming is the creation of yet unseen new bodies, and as often the case with the unknown, it is often perceived as monstrous.
56. *Ibid.*, 308.
57. *Ibid.*, 310.
58. Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequences* (London: Routledge, 2004), 3.

59. Brian Massumi, "Sensing the Virtual, Building the Insensible," *Architectural Design* 68.5/6, "Hypersurface Architecture," ed. Stephen Perrella (1998): 16-24.

60. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 310.

61. *Ibid.*, 309.

62. *Ibid.*, 262.

63. *Ibid.*, 278.

64. Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 16.

65. There are two interpretations to the abstract plane in Deleuze: one is positive — the abstract machine of the plane of consistency; the second negative — the great machine of society and the organism. I am referring here to the first.