

Enter the Dragon

By Michael Sragow

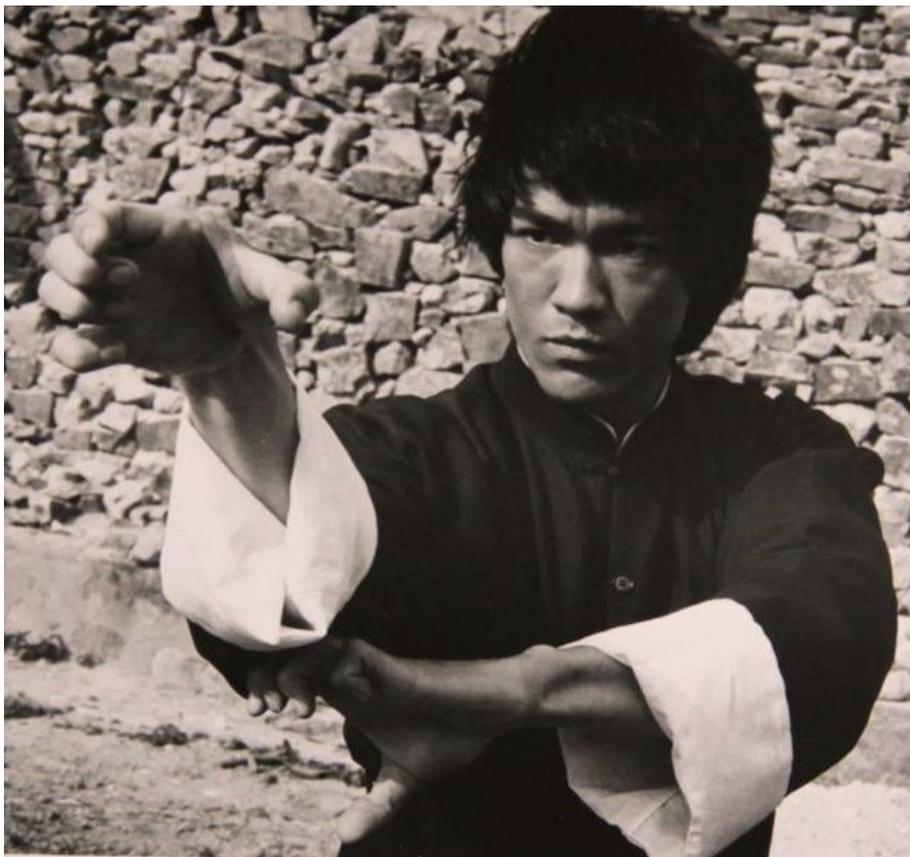
"The A List: The National Society of Film Critics' 100 Essential Films," 2002

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In "Enter the Dragon," a Shaolin temple priest and a Western intelligence agent persuade a suburban Hong Kong phenom named Lee (played by *Bruce Lee*) to attend a gangland chieftain's kung fu tournament. It's actually an audition for potential thugs to fill an underworld army. But Lee disdains the suggestion that he might need military help. He's an old-fashioned Chinese individualist; his body makes him super self-sufficient. "Enter the Dragon" is basically a revenge fantasy: the henchmen of Lee's mobster-enemy (Shih Kien) hounded Lee's sister to her death. But along with its tension (and its camp), the film is suffused with sympathy for outcasts and underdogs. One of Lee's allies is an

American black (Jim Kelly) who escapes to the kung fu match after practicing on a pair of racist cops. (When crossing the Hong Kong harbor he mutters, "Ghettos are the same all over the world — they stink.") Add a debt-ridden white gambler (John Saxon), who knew Kelly's Black Power black belt in Vietnam, and you've got a three-man shock troop for the Rainbow Coalition. When this film premiered, extremists were telling slum kids to get their hands on guns; Lee's message was that angry young men of all colors possess "the fire next time" within.

Lee died on July 20, 1973, six weeks before his \$600,000 "epic" debuted and went on to gross \$150 million worldwide. It's a gaudy, gimcrack construction that's also a whirling piece of legendry. Lee coined his own action-film iconography out of flying fists and feet. Twenty-five years later he still excites that audience from the moment he appears, in wrestling briefs that drape his buttocks like the cheekiest, chicest Calvin Kleins. It's less a matter of sexual attraction than transcendent awe. He's reed-thin and feather-delicate, and when he goes on the attack there's no macho cool about him. He vibrates with concentrated energy, like a spindle. You fear his intensity will crack your skull. He takes you so far into his gladiator's psyche that you *feel* his moves and countermoves even when he gyrates too quickly for you to understand them. He could be giving himself whiplash as he shakes his head



Bruce Lee demonstrates his kung fu mastery. Courtesy Library of Congress

clear for the next step; more than thinking on his feet, he thinks on bobbing toes. Because he was so incredibly quick and light, I once called him the Fred Astaire of kung fu, making martial arts look easy. But you say he's the Baryshnikov, exercising midair scissors cuts as complex as Balanchine ballets, or the Savion Glove, conjuring improvisational dance from his rattling kinetic rhythm.

The opening match in "Enter the Dragon" is a warm-up for novices: Chop Sockey 101. He wins it with ease and without preening. Of course, Lee choreographed all the fights in the film himself. But he makes them appear spontaneous — no, inspired — and as selfless as the work of a completely engaged athlete. Lee fills the movie with acrobatic wonders. Vaulting into a tree he appears to be reversing gravity; more than in any "Superman" film, you believe he can fly.

Lee's triumph is one of personality and vision, not just physical performance. At rest, his slightness, the light timbre of his voice, and his unlined features are disarmingly boyish. Lee also has a boy's furtive cunning. He has as much control over his facial muscles as he does over his biceps — we know that his occasional blankness is an act of will, a camouflage against prying eyes. At sport he doesn't pander to sadistic fantasies; he plays by strict, fair rules. But in a grudge match, his very being alters. His

lungs expand like bellows, filling his body with new weight. His muscles ripple like electrified barbed wire. And his face takes on the aspect of a demon. It's tantamount to seeing the Incredible Hulk emerge without special effects.

Lee communicates instantly with teenagers and children because he seems to have just straddled adolescence himself. Most of the time, he's stoic, but when family honor is at stake, and his private essence challenged, he allows himself to go tantrum-crazy. In his Hulk act he lets loose a primal scream. Lee refutes the notion that we grow up and out of youthful sentiments, jettisoning them in stages, like rockets. Lee holds them in equipoise — and assumes a suave, wry maturity. He shows that childish emotions need not be retrogressive; they can be downright restorative for adults.

You can predict how Lee will react from moment to moment, yet his personality hangs together. His shifts in accent from the slurred and breathy to the ultra-deliberate and Mr. Moto-esque (“con me” becomes “khan me”) somehow merge to seem pleasing and refined. His mystique is magnetic. He's never just “an inscrutable Oriental.” He betrays enough of his inner workings to compel our curiosity. The Lee figure is a rebel without a portfolio. But he does have a cause, which nothing less than authenticity. Near the beginning of “Enter the Dragon,” he urges a boy at the Shaolin Temple to kick him with “emotional content.” The boy holds back, reluctant to attack an understanding older-brother figure. Lee doesn't condescend or coddle; instead he slaps the kid repeatedly, catalyzing fighting passion. What Lee is trying to teach isn't a bag of tricks or an ethereal ritual, but an organic discipline. He's putting flesh on the Force. He wants us to be so attuned to our emotions and abilities that we can set them loose in controlled torrents — floods of feeling coursing through physical floodgates.

In the 1979 kung fu movie “Circle of Iron,” made from a script Lee was developing at the time of his death, TV's martial arts master, David Carradine, taught a surly neophyte Lee's special Spartan strain of Zen. Carradine instructed the boy to distrust abstract religious values and to respect justice — not arbitrary rules. The overriding theme was “Know Thyself”; when Carradine led his tutee to the Book of Enlightenment, each page was a mirror. Idealistic though it sounds, the saturnine Carradine and his reluctant disciple (Jeff Cooper) made Lee's philosophy seem like an excuse for breaking nonbelievers' bones. Watching Lee in “Enter the Dragon,” lessons that could be gassy or dangerous become concrete and admirable. When Lee keeps his foes from invading *his* circle of iron, he puts value back into the phrase “creating space.” His integrity works like an invisible shield. His presence is so unself-conscious and sure, he's less a beacon of selfhood than a paragon of honesty and wholeness. Jackie Chan may have brought his own unique form of martial arts comedy to movies. But as a heroic ideal, no one has filled Lee's fighting shoes. No one's even invaded his space.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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