

Reviewed by Karen Fang

*Experts in Action:
Transnational Hong Kong–
Style Stunt Work and
Performance*

by Lauren Steimer.

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Chief among the many appeals of Quentin Tarantino's 2019 alternative history fable, *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*, is the film's centering of a stuntman. "You're too pretty to be a stuntman," snarks the movie's cartoonishly bombastic Bruce Lee (Mike Moh) of the protagonist, played by Brad Pitt. In a typically Tarantino-ish mélange of film nerd and fan boy humor, the line reminds us that stunt workers, by definition, are never stars.

By contrast, Lauren Steimer's new book, *Experts in Action: Transnational Hong Kong–Style Stunt Work and Performance*, is a scholarly exploration of the underlying premise that Tarantino (who is a recurring reference throughout her book) presents with such cheek. Situated between cinema and performance studies, and contributing to production culture, fan, and media industry studies, Steimer's work shines a spotlight on the "stunting stars" whose physical feats are a main attraction of contemporary action-centered film and television.¹ Her specific interest is in how Hong Kong cinema's transnational influence has offered industrial and professional opportunities that might

¹ Lauren Steimer, *Experts in Action: Transnational Hong Kong–Style Stuntwork and Performance* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 2.

not otherwise have been possible outside of Hollywood. Through case studies that include Thai action stars Tony Jaa and Jeeja Yanin, the international production of popular television series *Xena: Warrior Princess* (syndication, 1995–2001), and celebrated stunt doubles and action choreographers such as Dayna Grant, Chad Stahelski, and Zoë Bell, Steimer shows how global media and entertainment have assimilated Hong Kong production practices such as frontal performance, uncut action sequences, and a full-time second unit that enjoys a high degree of independent agency.² These developments are part of the longer transnational flow of labor that has empowered Hollywood since the mid-1990s and whose effects have irrevocably transformed the look and feel of global media. Steimer analyzes the flexible, diffuse, truly global media landscape of the first decades of the twenty-first century, which scarcely resembles the unilateral, predominately transatlantic poaching of Anglo-European talent that enabled US global media dominance throughout the twentieth century. As Steimer puts it, adapting a phrase originally used by *Xena* director Doug Leffler to describe how he intentionally borrowed from Hong Kong action and production practice, Hong Kong is now a “reservoir of technique” whose impact on global media exceeds mainstream Hollywood cinema, spilling out from movies to television, documentary, and other content heavily influenced by fan fiction. This ripple effect is geographic as well as transmedial: while Hollywood lifts, in typically unabashed fashion, from Hong Kong, Hong Kong’s global influence is further augmented by its Hollywood aura, fostering lateral connections with other non-Hollywood production sites—such as New Zealand—that benefit from their proximity to Hong Kong.³

Students and scholars of Hong Kong cinema, global media, performance, and industry studies will find much of value in *Experts in Action*. As a behind-the-scenes look into the specialized labor of contemporary stunts and physical performance, Steimer’s book offers a fascinating glimpse into how the human spectacle of modern action cinema straddles both cutting-edge motion capture technologies and low-tech paraphernalia such as cardboard boxes to break falls. The book opens with a sustained discussion of practice theory and the scholarship on expertise, including Malcolm Gladwell’s well-known and oft-cited assertion of 10,000 hours as the minimum training time necessary to achieve mastery in any discipline. As example and model of such expertise, Steimer cites Jackie Chan’s Peking opera training and Hong Kong stunt crew, whose influence and standard is evident throughout all the other performers and choreographers studied in Steimer’s subsequent chapters.⁴ This paradigm of expert performance frames Steimer’s overall goal of according attention and due credit to individual performers, action choreographers, and the “collective effort necessary to produce phenomenal body

2 Zoë Bell’s career is particularly noteworthy. Initially hired as Uma Thurman’s “crash and smash” double for *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* (Quentin Tarantino, 2003), tae kwon do-trained Bell was promoted to fight double, garnering considerable attention for her work in both *Kill Bill* films. She stars as herself in the 2004 documentary *Double Dare* (Amanda Micheli) as well as in Tarantino’s 2007 quasi-slasher film, *Death Proof*. Since then, her acting roles have outnumbered her stunting work; in 2020, Bell signed with Creative Artists Agency.

3 Steimer, *Experts in Action*, 89, 5.

4 Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (New York: Little, Brown, 2008).

effects.”⁵ As Steimer wryly notes, “while, in the course of my research, I have encountered countless critics, academics, and fans who decry wirework as the effortless trickery of unskilled performers, I have yet to meet one who can fulfill most of these requirements.”⁶ However facile it may be to pick apart action sequences, Steimer’s goal is to “identify the ways in which expert labor makes spectacle possible.”⁷

Notably, fan knowledge and commentary exert considerable insight in this analysis, manifesting an inclusive and democratic approach that is to Steimer’s credit. Part of her methodology includes original ethnographic research, in which fans were surveyed regarding their reception of Jackie Chan and other action stars. Unlike some other work in fan studies, which may either subordinate fans to objects of sociological analysis or explore their creation of new content, Steimer engages with fans as fellow theorists themselves. Weaving in fan quotes and quantifiable data to document the popular reception of stunt sequences, Steimer treats fans as “expert interlocuters” who are as valid and insightful as the credentialed scholars within our own discipline.⁸ For Hong Kong film studies and film and media studies at large, Steimer’s approach models a multidimensional, inclusive methodology notably unbounded by geography, media specificity, or institutional and disciplinary bona fides.

Given *Experts in Action*’s capaciousness and the subtlety with which Steimer treats her subject, however, I did want to read more about how her case studies are complicated by gender. Respondents to Steimer’s survey about young female Thai action star Jeeja Yanin “mostly spoke about her size, age, and cuteness,” thereby revealing another dimension in which some stunt workers and physical performers are visually commodified on-screen.⁹ Similarly, while Steimer’s discussion of *Xena*’s production provides an intriguing variation on familiar commentary on the show’s physical imagery and queer sensibility, the very fact of the action series’ female protagonists also invites questions about gender and behind-the-scenes agency. Whether known for their work in television series such as *Xena* or in feature films, female stunting stars such as Yanin, Grant, and Bell are an even smaller subset of the already small cohort of stunt experts who have earned professional visibility and influence. As such, their careers should also raise questions about how their gender may have facilitated or distorted their reception and professional autonomy.

On a related note, *Expert in Action*’s narrative of professional recognition and opportunity could be complicated by a more cautionary analysis of the consequences of Hong Kong cinema’s outsize influence on global action imagery. One case in point is *Xena* director Lefler’s aforementioned reference to Hong Kong cinema as a “reservoir of technique.” Although stemming from admiration and homage, such an approach diminishes an entire nation and industry to a resource of neocolonial exploitation. Similarly, the widespread

5 Steimer, *Experts in Action*, 174.

6 Steimer, 108, 174.

7 Steimer, 163.

8 Steimer, 16.

9 Steimer, 83.

adoption of Hong Kong cinema's smaller-budget production methods raises uneasy parallels to outsourcing. Although individual, migrant, and female workers have benefited from both globalization and a gender-diversified workplace, expanded female representation and transnational movement too often cause wage stagnation, reduced benefits and workplace protections, and more precarious labor practices. While virtuoso performers and in-demand action visionaries such as Bell, Grant, and legendary Hong Kong martial artist Yuen Woo-ping command increasing creative authority within ever larger industrial circles, one can't help but wonder how their compensation compares with the Hollywood insiders they replace or the A-listers they double. How has this embrace of international action creatives impacted the salary and workplace conditions for unionized Hollywood workers? Now that Bell and Grant have transcended the anonymity of most stunt workers, do they still benefit from their profession's established pay scale and protections—or are they now vulnerable to the same pay discrepancies as other female stars?

This question brings me back to Tarantino's "too pretty for a stuntman" line in *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*. Wry and insightful, what seems like a throwaway line in a scene and a movie known for its overtly fantastical rendering of Hollywood is also a revealing glimpse into how Hollywood has co-opted the visceral action for which Hong Kong cinema was once renowned. *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood's* depiction of Bruce Lee has been widely criticized as counterfactual and unflattering, with more nuanced discussions also taking Tarantino to task for caricaturing a screen legend to whom he is clearly indebted.¹⁰ Those assessments, I agree, are well founded, and in its dismaying appropriation of a Hong Kong cinema legend, *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* is a telling example of how frequently the industry embraces unique talent, only to subordinate them to archetypally good-looking, white, cis male A-listers. Steimer's nuanced, democratic study, with its commitment to showing "the ways in which expert labor makes spectacle possible" is an important step toward challenging this history.¹¹ And as Steimer notes in a rousing "call to action" that concludes her book, "If we wish to call ourselves experts in action," "there is much work left to be done."¹²

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10 Jen Yamato, "Bruce Lee's Family Calls 'Once Upon a Time' 'a Mockery.' Is It Inult or Homage?," *Los Angeles Times*, July 31, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2019-07-31/bruce-lee-tarantino-once-upon-a-time-in-hollywood>; Gabrielle Bruney and Brady Langmann, "Why the Bruce Lee Fight in *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* Became the Movie's Most Controversial Scene," *Esquire*, June 30, 2021, <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/a28607548/mike-moh-bruce-lee-once-upon-a-time-in-hollywood-controversy/>; and Tom Fordy, "From Kung Fu to Quentin Tarantino: Why Hollywood Keeps Beating up Bruce Lee," *Telegraph*, August 15, 2019.

11 Steimer, *Experts in Action*, 163.

12 Steimer, 172, 173.