JOHNNIE TO KEI-FUNG'S PTU

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1

Introducing the Film; Introducing Johnnie — 'One of Our Own'

'It is not enough to think about Hong Kong cinema simply in terms of a tight commercial space occasionally opened up by individual talent, on the model of auteurs in Hollywood. The situation is both more interesting and more complicated.'

— Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*

'Yet many of Hong Kong's most accomplished films were made in the years after the 1993 downturn. Directors had become more sophisticated, and perhaps financial desperation freed them to experiment ... The golden age is over; like most local cinemas, Hong Kong's will probably consist of a small annual output and a handful of films of artistic interest. Nonetheless, the films that stand out will probably display an unswerving appeal to the norms and forms of popular cinema.'

— David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong — Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*

> 'The police and criminals are different sides of the same coin. Where there are thieves, there are police. Where there are police, there are thieves. You cannot have one without the other.'
> — Johnnie To, Interview on DVD version of *PTU*

Background: Johnnie To and contemporary Hong Kong cinema

Johnnie To Kei-fung has been an unobtrusive but prolific and innovative contributor to the Hong Kong cultural scene. He is an increasingly esteemed filmmaker in Hong Kong, admired among overseas aficionados of Hong Kong action films, as well as a highly experienced film producer and the creative heart of the independent film company, Milkyway Image. However he has shunned the short-lived 'bubble reputation' of celebrity, relying rather on his prodigious work ethic and his impressive track record to do the talking for him. As well as being a key figure in the industry, To has been a member of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, advising conscientiously and insightfully on cinema as an art form. While he has yet to enjoy the same sort of international critical acclaim as Hong Kong filmmakers like Wong Kar-wai and John Woo or transnational Chinese directors like Ang Lee and Zhang Yimou, To has commanded respect and admiration for both the variety of his output and his increasingly accomplished direction. His films continue to win recognition, both in Hong Kong's own local film awards and in European festivals.

Despite the local and international critical plaudits for *The Mission* (1999), *Running Out of Time* (1999), *PTU* (2003), *Breaking News* and *Throw Down* (both 2004), his more recent films *Election I* and *II* (2005/2006), *Exiled* (2006) and *Sparrow* (2008) and his consistent cinema work across a number of popular film genres, To has not as yet attracted quite the cachet of 'coolness'

of a John Woo or a Wong Kar-wai in the broader consciousness of international film commentary. However, there is no doubt that his profile as a director is getting stronger with each passing year, and every new release, especially those in the gangster-cop genres, serves to consolidate this growing reputation. His earlier comedy and action-based genre films established his presence on the scene as an extremely competent director, and one capable of shooting a film within budget and according to schedule, both of which are crucial considerations in the frenetic, profit-margin-conscious Hong Kong film industry. For this reason To has never been anything but busy as a director and producer, frequently juggling up to three films in any given year. Just glancing at his extensive filmography, we appreciate his outstanding contribution to Hong Kong's film and television output. Yet it is only in the current decade that he has matured into a major Asian cineaste, and his films have come to suggest a distinctive, if quirky, aspect of Hong Kong's dichotomous local/global psyche, as manifest in the films of many of the city's 'New Wave' of directors. Not that To himself can really be considered a part of this new wave, despite the fact that he has played an increasingly significant part in making Hong Kong films a recognisable product in the international market-place. His name is rarely mentioned in connection with any particular grouping outside his own Milkyway enterprise.

In a 2004 essay Esther Cheung and Jamie Ku tackle this thorny issue of whether or not it is appropriate to categorise Hong Kong directors as 'New Wave', pointing out that Hong Kong cinema 'has gained the *status* of a national cinema in the film institution although Hong Kong films can by no means be understood within the paradigm of the nation-state. Some critics have been dismissive of the New Wave Cinema by questioning whether the cinema had ever existed; nonetheless a retrospective study is in fact an assertion of the New Wave and its relevance to the local and global institutional status of the Hong Kong cinema'.[1] Whilst this validation of the study

of Hong Kong cinema is no doubt a compelling one, it is not exactly clear where To, as an independent figure not associated with any particular 'wave', fits into the bigger picture. Ackbar Abbas has recently posited Hong Kong's relationship with the bigger picture in his essay on Hong Kong cinema, an essay anthologised in a study of cinema of small nations. He refers to its fragmentary nature thus: 'The fragment as nation allows us to define, tentatively, in what sense it is possible to think about the Hong Kong cinema as a "national" cinema: in the sense that it is a cinema that perceives the nation from the point of view of the fragment. Its relation to nationhood is unorthodox. It does not see the nation as a finished or achieved entity, but catches it at a moment when the nature of nationhood itself is changing, under pressure from globalisation.'[2] Furthermore, in his Hong Kong cultural overview *Chinese Face-Off* Lo Kwai-cheung has referred to Hong Kong cinema's tendency to ignore the conventional paradigms of local and national by appearing to position itself independently: 'Hong Kong films made during the transitional period and even the post-97 productions are actually becoming more transnationalised than nationalised, offering a provocative reconception of what we usually mean by "local" and inadvertently subverting the concept of nation.'[3] Chu Yiu Wai, critiquing 'the seemingly pure local identity' of Hong Kong portrayed in certain post-97 films, has pointed out that this supposedly 'local' identity 'has to be problematized before any formation of identity can be negotiated in the age of transnationalism'.[4]

These perspectives on Hong Kong cinema in general are highly illuminating. However, To's name rarely comes up in the context of such critical discussion. As regards narratives of Chineseness, of diaspora or of transnational, global identity, his work does not seem to be part of any school, trend or movement, or of direct significance to such debates, as, for example, the output of directors like Ann Hui and Fruit Chan has been. Likewise he appears reluctant to involve himself in any cinematic discourse on postcolonial, post-

handover identity politics, at least in terms of clarifying a stance or ideological position, although certain of his films hint at his distrust of official versions of Hong Kong–mainland relations. In any case, as we shall see in connection with the narrative symbolism of *PTU*, To is neither celebrating nor seriously exploring the relationship with mainland China, despite the fact that there is a mainland 'foreign element' embedded in the film's plot and sub-text. For all of these reasons it is difficult to cast To in the role of ardent champion of Hong Kong's local identity cause, or as a local (or glocal) hero resisting assimilation into the wider national and transnational contexts of the industry for all his Hong Kong local-boy-made-good credentials. What we can see in many of his films is a sense of marginalisation or polarisation arising from social and personal crises or contingencies. Few commentators, though, have considered his work an exemplar of theoretical-critical paradigms in respect of Hong Kong postcoloniality. One of the aims of this study is to assess whether, in fact, it does have something astute to say about Hong Kong's postcolonial identity.

To a considerable extent Stephen Teo's detailed new critical study of To's career, *Director in Action — Johnnie To and the Hong Kong Action Film*, has helped to address the paucity of critical assessment of his work to date. Indeed, Teo's informed and insightful account of his development as a major, contemporary Asian filmmaker has filled a gaping lacuna in contemporary Hong Kong film studies, and his identification of To as 'an uneven auteur' offers us a critical yardstick to explore his work further. This critical evaluation will be explored more closely in the concluding chapter in connection with the film's 'aesthetic formalism', a term that Teo applies to *PTU* and two other To films. Another issue that will be addressed in this book relates to the designation of To's oeuvre as 'action' films and of To himself as a specifically 'action' director, which I find at the very least questionable, and as I shall argue, again in the final chapter, misleading with reference to *PTU*. It seems as inapposite as calling

Scorsese, Kurosawa or Coppola 'action' directors, in spite of the gripping scenes of action integral to their films. Teo's rationale for his subtitle '*Director in Action*' is perhaps understandable in the Hong Kong context. However, Paul Willemen, among others, has already called into question the designation, explaining how it originated as a label of convenience in video stores, rather than as a specific critically and professionally acknowledged genre.[5] At the same time we recognise a contemporary type of 'action' film that is often culturally hybrid, if superficial in content. Self-consciously and formulaically global, this type of film aims at an intellectually undemanding viewer and is calculated to generate fast returns at the box office. Most of To's movies would be utterly misplaced in such a category. Action, as Willemen's article elucidates, is often loosely and lazily applied as a classification of films, frequently failing to encapsulate a screenwriter's script and director's mise-en-scène that is predicated, as To's best films are, on the relationship between action and inaction. Indeed, as we shall see, To's so-called action scenes revolve around gunplay as the predominant form of action, a convention which is more closely connected with western, *policier* and crime genres. I will argue, therefore that the genre of 'action' is a misnomer for To's body of work, and one that ultimately does not enhance appreciation of his personal style of filmmaking. In so doing I shall focus on his expertise in narrative development and his virtuosic use of film language.

The present study will concentrate on a single work by Johnnie To, namely *PTU*, and seek to explain the significance of what I propose as an underestimated gem of a film, indeed something of an unsung masterpiece, which the critical success of the major diptych *Election* and the recent European vogue for *Exiled* have caused to be overshadowed. The film's release was, as we shall see, unfortunate in its timing, at least from a commercial perspective. As regards the organisation of this book, it is intended to offer insights to those who know To's work, as well as to those who have only

heard of his importance on the Hong Kong film scene. This opening chapter introduces the reader to his work and style. The succeeding one will focus on the issue of location and film space, the third will analyse the film's narrative in detailed sharp focus, and the final chapter will explore its allegorical signifying systems and aesthetic qualities, in addition to offering a critical assessment of the film's continuing topicality.

In assessing this work I hope to challenge a certain critical fallacy that seems to have taken root among critics and To admirers alike that *PTU* suffers from underdeveloped screenplay and characterisation. At the same time my wish is to enhance enjoyment, and dare I say, appreciation and understanding of the film's technical and thematic qualities, which are characteristically understated, subtle and artistically satisfying. It would have been rewarding to consider other examples of To's oeuvre, such as *The Mission*, *Election*, *Running Out of Time* (Teo's choice for To's best movie) or even *Exiled* for the distinction of a special study, the last-named being the Hong Kong selection for the 2008 Academy Awards. In some respects there would be more to say about some of these films from the point of view of character motivation and psychological complexity. However, *PTU* offers the viewer a more aesthetically rigorous and, I would argue, a more original film experience than these others, in spite of their many exceptional qualities. I believe that in years to come it will be seen as an example of a film director with a very personal signature style at the peak of his creative powers.

Film *cognoscenti* in a number of European countries including France, Germany and Italy (all with distinguished film traditions of their own) have noted To's development as a filmmaker of style and originality. In addition to sweeping the 2004 Golden Bauhinia awards in Hong Kong, *PTU* garnered a Prix du Jury award in 2004 at France's Festival de Cognac and both *Exiled* and *PTU* have been released to critical commendation recently in the U.K.

Yet in Hong Kong it is broadly true to say that this experienced director has been somewhat taken for granted. His fusion of highly aesthetically refined art-house cinematography and mise-en-scène with minimalist narrative exposition and development in established police and triad thriller and martial arts genres has perhaps contributed to this neglect. Hong Kong audiences appear to have assumed that he is a competent, if idiosyncratic, filmmaker of genre movies and to have focused mainly on his minimalist plots and taciturn characters without fully appreciating his stylised and often brilliantly realised film aesthetic. In part this misconception is due, as Teo has noted, to Johnnie To's work ethic and commitment to developing cinema in Hong Kong on a range of fronts. In part too, it is a result of Hong Kong commercial cinema's emphasis on star actors, who are vigorously marketed as though they were brand names, usually to the detriment of the creative and direction team behind this most collaborative of art forms. To has earned the reputation of being uncompromising in his demands and expectations on set, hardly the sort of attitude that endears him to the pampered young stars of Hong Kong cinema. A good example of this is his intolerance toward the use of private mobile phones on set, irrespective of the celebrity status of the user. One might say that the Hong Kong celebrity scene tends to admire him from a safe distance, while many local people seem to know that he is an important artist in Hong Kong but are not exactly sure why.

To started off directing and producing within the highly structured discipline of typical Hong Kong fast-output studio cinema, working on vehicles for emergent comedy star (now internationally established) Stephen Chow and other popular actors. Films like *Justice, My Foot* (1992) and *The Mad Monk* (1993) or *The Eighth Happiness* (1988, with Chow Yun Fat) were never going to win serious critical plaudits, quite apart from their screenplay and characterisation limitations, because comedy is less exportable, particularly the highly localised and often throw-away Hong Kong

variety. *The Heroic Trio* (1993) and its sequel *Executioners* (1993), which To co-directed with respected action director Ching Siu-tung, became cult classics in the global video market. Indeed, To has spoken of his excellent working rapport and division of labour with Ching.[6] At this stage of his career To had his feet very firmly on the ground and recognised the need to balance the budget and avoid losing money on the films, with a main goal of making a modest profit for his investors. Subsequently he felt that his abilities would best be served by starting his own film production company, which was dubbed Milkyway Image at its inception in 1996. At this point of his career To began to concentrate on film production and brought in a stable of young directors like Patrick Yau and Patrick Leung and scriptwriting specialist Yau Nai-hoi as well as his colleague and friend Wai Ka-fai, with whom he has co-directed on a number of films (*Needing You*; *My Left Eye Sees Ghosts*; *Turn Left, Turn Right*; *Fulltime Killer*; *Running on Karma; The Mad Detective*). Nevertheless, his hand remains firmly on the tiller of the company, even though many of the co-directed and co-produced films are less impressive than his solo work as director.

In spite of his growing aspiration for wider regional and national recognition, as evidenced by the partly English-language and partly Japanese-language *Fulltime Killer* (2001), To continues to produce, and direct or co-direct, a dazzling array of films for Milkyway in a range of heterogeneous genres. Although his real *métier* in cinema appears to be the serious police-gangster film, he continues to direct and produce pot-boiler romantic comedies and zany comedies, so beloved of the Hong Kong public especially at Chinese New Year. Hence *Fat Choi Spirit* (2002) and *Yesterday Once More* (2004) accentuate the egregious nature of his approach to filmmaking. As a director who commands wide respect, To seems unconcerned about the stylistic variety and heterogeneity of his back catalogue. It is clear that he has always had an eye for commercial viability, having served his apprenticeship in television dramas and studio work in

the 1980s and early 90s. Another factor to bear in mind is that To has been mindful of the sharp commercial decline in Hong Kong cinema since the Asian economic crisis of the late 1990s, a trend that is currently proving difficult to counteract, notwithstanding the city's strong economic revival.

One way of seeing his contribution to Hong Kong cinema of the last decade is that, very much as his 1997 fire-fighting movie *Lifeline* suggests, the heroism and team spirit of ordinary people are needed to get the city through the doldrums. To is clearly committed to Hong Kong cinema as an institution. Solid achievements, rather than bravura showmanship, are required in the current difficulties, hence the alternation between safe commercially viable cinema and what he may have regarded, especially when Milkyway was founded, as more self-indulgent, 'experimental', auteur-type projects. 'Exercises' are how he refers to such films in his fascinating interview with Teo.[7] In another interview with Shirley Lau for the *South China Morning Post*, To has clarified his compromise strategy of filmmaking: 'For every few commercial films I make, I have to do something that is entirely personal without considering what the market wants. There's a lot of satisfaction as well as pressure in it. But it's a regular exercise I use to evaluate myself.'[8]

In general one can say that To has succeeded in steering what in retrospect seems to be a judicious course between journeyman filmmaking of more conventional gangster, heroic drama and whimsical comedy genre movies in his earlier career and, latterly, increasingly idiosyncratic auteur-type projects. Nevertheless he continues to concentrate on screen action, or at least the filmic relationship between action and inaction, in many of his highly acclaimed films of recent years. *PTU* exemplifies this stylistic development, and for some commentators this and other recent To films may epitomise his emergence as an auteur director. However, as the Coen brothers have observed *apropos* of themselves, a collaborative, ensemble-oriented ethos of filmmaking rather

tends to go against the grain of auteurship.[9] To's comedies and several of the co-directed films with Wai Ka-fai evince a tendency toward formulaic Hong Kong wackiness, carefree improbability or inconsistency and comic-book levity. Significantly, he reserves his own directorial credit for his most original and socially relevant work, which succeeds in shaping the *policier* and crime genres, rather in the great Hitchcock, Kurosawa and Melville tradition, to his own ends. We shall examine this connection more fully in chapters 3 and 4, especially with reference to Melville's fatalistic gangster-cop movies *Le Doulos* (1963), *Le Cercle Rouge* (1970) (of which it may be observed that the Buddhist scriptural quotation of the opening appears to have inspired the opening reference of Hong Kong's own *Infernal Affairs*), and *Un Flic* (*Dirty Money*, 1972). However, it is significant that Melville's great lead actor Alain Delon is deliberately referenced in *Fulltime Killer* — Andy Lau's professional killer informing a lesser species of thug that he should see a certain, unspecified French film (presumably *Le Samouraï*, 1967) to understand that you do not mess with an ice-cool professional hit man. Of course To is not alone among Hong Kong film directors in his evident admiration for the work of both Kurosawa and Melville.

To's approach to direction, particularly in the cooperatively creative context of his Milkyway Images production house, flies in the face of received wisdom about commercial filmmaking. His casting preference for character types and his reliance on a core of ensemble actors stand in sharp contrast to Hong Kong's Hollywood-esque star system. Granted his ensembles include household Hong Kong names such as Anthony Wong, Andy Lau, Cecilia Cheung and Louis Koo, as well as professionally admired actors of the calibre of Simon Yam, Lau Ching-wan, Ruby Wong, Lam Suet, Nick Cheung and Francis Ng. However the film is never a vehicle for the star name in a Johnnie To work; rather the actor must sublimate his or her ego to the requirements of the director's cinematic flair

and sensibility. Perhaps To's scepticism about conventional Hong Kong–style heroism in his more recent films and his tendency to eschew the romantic stereotypes of Tsui Hark and John Woo in favour of more mundane and yet more psychologically compelling protagonists have disappointed those in Hong Kong who like their cinema to be predictable, generic and Hollywood-heroic. And yet, To remains addicted to action and crime genres, albeit adapted to his own narrative and ideological purposes. It is precisely this quality of ambivalence in To's films and in the way he playfully subverts and yet respects crime and action genres, I believe, that makes his recent films special, much in the same way that Coen brothers' films are special to the initiated. The analogy is far from gratuitous since there are a number of similarities in their respective approaches to filmmaking, including idiosyncratic perspectives on life, as well as a distinct predilection for ensemble work and for using a small group of core actors supplemented by the occasional star name in most of his movies. Clearly, the Coens' use of Frances McDormand, Steve Buscemi, John Turturro and others on a regular basis can be seen as a distinctive element of their signature style of filmmaking.

Significantly, the *PTU* acting ensemble has been retained for what can be seen as a series of sequels or spin-offs being produced for television based on To's original idea for his 2003 film. These four tele-films plus one feature film have already been shot and are in post-production at present (November 2008). The same actors as the source film appear in freshly generated storylines with altered names, an attempt perhaps to demarcate a clear distance between them and the earlier film. The first of the four, entitled *Tactical Unit — The Code*, has already been shown in festivals, including the October 2008 Hong Kong Asian Film Festival. It was directed by *PTU* editor and associate director Law Wing-cheong with To at the production helm again, as in *Eye in the Sky*. Picking up some of the themes of *PTU*, this film focuses on an investigation by the Complaints Against the Police body (CAPO) in response to allegations of brutality

against a triad suspect by members of the PTU unit. According to initial critical reaction, this first in the series of planned sequels has much in common with *PTU* without managing to capture the moody suspense and cinematic flair of what in adaptation terminology may be called its 'parent' text. At the time of writing the latest spin-off is *Tactical Unit — Comrade in Arms* (December 2008). Clearly, the decision to spawn sequels from *PTU* by the Milkyway team seems to reflect a renewed interest in the film in Hong Kong and wider appreciation of its quirky originality than seemed likely back in 2003.

PTU and the SARS year: Hong Kong's longest night

The rationale for this case study of *PTU* is that the film is the most distinctive in the To back catalogue, the one that is hardest to place or categorise and the one that demands most engagement, or at least concentration, from the spectator. The tense, moody ambience of films such as *The Mission*, and more recently *Exiled*, and the obsessive and pathological character study of the two *Election* films (in many respects To's *Godfather*, if I can be forgiven the analogy) rightly make these films stand out as major works of the last ten years. None of these films, however, explores the group-individual dichotomy quite as compellingly, grittily and economically as *PTU*, for all their undoubted stylishness. No other To film challenges our idea of cinema as effectively as this one or generates quite such *jouissance* (pleasure) of the transgressive text, to use Barthes's term. Like some other To works, the film has fallen between the cracks of art-house and commercial categorization. *PTU* was several years in the making, which is generally anathema in Hong Kong terms and something of a milestone in To's film output. Just as *Election* can — and indeed has been — considered as a socially allegorical work, with the ongoing debate about Hong Kong's political system and the city's political dependence on China as its point of reference, so too is it possible to

see in *PTU* much more than a police-triad genre vehicle, but rather a socio-political 'essay' on police powers and practices, public safety and deadly virus-like incursions from across the border. Indeed, some Chinese-language commentators took the allegory further, going so far as to liken the bumbling central character in the film to Hong Kong's hapless chief executive at the time, Tung Chee-hwa. Such speculative insights are, in my view, best filed under 'interesting', but they are not particularly helpful in approaching the film's main concerns.

There is no doubt, however, that *PTU* can be justifiably interpreted as allegorical and emblematic of post-millennial events in Hong Kong. During a time of great uncertainty about Hong Kong's future, and indeed its present, the 2003 film reflected the ambivalent mood of the city perfectly. The film's release coincided with the SARS outbreak and the socio-economic trough that Hong Kong was experiencing in that most difficult year. SARS — severe acute respiratory syndrome, to give the disease its full name — seemed at the time to be an epidemic of potentially catastrophic proportions, almost a Black Death of the twenty-first century. As it transpired, the outbreak was contained thanks to the brave and unremitting efforts of the medical profession, and in the vast majority of cases the virus was isolated and successfully treated. In the spring of 2003, however, people were afraid to go out for fear of contracting the disease, and the usually bustling Hong Kong streets were uncharacteristically empty. At night the streets assumed an even eerier quality which the film conveys, more unintentionally than intentionally, since To had started work on it in 2000 and deferred completion while he worked on other more commercial projects. *PTU*'s darkness, both literal and metaphorical, and its distinctly film noir ambience evoked the sombre mood of Hong Kong people in much the same way that Andrew Lau and Alan Mak's *Infernal Affairs* trilogy of the same period did. By contrast with the latter films, however, To's work had a quirky, ironic humour that defied total pessimism.

In its representation of *esprit de corps* and collective trust, at least at street level, To's film conveyed, perhaps in its guardedly optimistic outcome, a sense of light at the end of Hong Kong's dark night that had started in 1998 with the Asian economic downturn. In more pragmatic terms, though, the timing of the film's release was far from perfect. The box-office take — just under HK$3 million — was predictably disappointing, given the painstaking work that had gone into the making of the film. On the other hand, considering the prevailing mood of Hong Kong in the spring of 2003 and the dearth of humans outside their flats and offices, *PTU* performed creditably, and has gone on to justify the time, money and effort expended by all associated with it. Moreover, as To pointed out in interview, the box-office revenue for *PTU* was approximately the same as that for *The Mission*, a film one would have expected to be considerably more popular on account of its subject matter. The latter film was released in more advantageous, non-SARS circumstances, although the Asian economic crisis had already made its impact felt in the film industry by the turn of the millennium. In many ways a watershed film for To, *The Mission*'s laconic style and pattern of alternation between inertia and rapid action laid the foundations for his film method of the new millennium and his emergence both as a filmmaker of note outside Hong Kong and as, arguably, the most significant contemporary Hong Kong filmmaker in the context of Hong Kong itself.

As *South China Morning Post* critic Paul Fonoroff observed in his uncharacteristically complimentary review after the film went on general release in May 2003, *PTU* shows To at his most mature as a filmmaker: 'Lean and sparse, with a pleasant sprinkling of dark humour and an absence of maudlin sentimentality, *PTU* is one of To's most mature works and the most satisfying local production so far this year [2003] ... Those willing to don face masks will find there is still life in a film industry whose demise has long been predicted, but which like Inspector Lo [one of the

protagonists, an OCTB (Organised Crime and Triad Bureau) sergeant, not an inspector] somehow manages to see a new dawn.'[10] A more distanced and non-local perspective on the film is offered by *Time Out*'s cryptically semi-anonymous reviewer (TJ) after the film's 2007 release in the U.K. The reviewer commented that 'the director's unruffled poise and the striking nocturnal camera work are a source of pleasure in themselves',[11] but opined that the script was 'not fully formed' (an ironically unintentional understatement, given that the script was largely improvised). TJ concludes with the verdict that 'the murder investigation and the missing firearm provide just enough plot to get the movie through the night, even though the character relationships are on the sketchy side'.[12]

Still 1 Sgt Lo with bandaged head.

The film's Hong Kong première had actually taken place in the context of the 27th Hong Kong International Film Festival's gala opening section a month prior to its Hong Kong general circuit release. The International Film Festival (HKIFF) has long been a major cultural event for the would-be 'world city', placing New Hong Kong Cinema side-by-side with other examples of world cinema in the public view. This practice is generally good for the image and the development of Hong Kong cinema, since

its other award and recognition mechanisms have the tendency to be parochial and somewhat self-congratulatory. The Film Festival as a Hong Kong institution is not without its own controversies, especially in respect of its choice of films and challenges to notions of its objectivity and autonomy. However it offers, in general, a critical, international yardstick by which Hong Kong films can be judged as well as a forum for evaluating Hong Kong cinema of the past in retrospective terms as a body of work in the cultural history of the city. In other words, the critical frame afforded any Hong Kong film by inclusion in the Festival emphasises its qualities as a cultural and aesthetic artefact, as opposed to an entertainment commodity — the latter approximating more closely to the image that an understandably consumerist-oriented local industry is apt to promote.

Given prime place at the Hong Kong Cultural Centre's Grand Theatre together with Yamada Yoji's *The Twilight Samurai*, the film was certainly showcased as the best of current Hong Kong cinema. In the HKIFF's programme of screenings, *PTU*'s plot is playfully, if slightly irritatingly, summarised in punning reference to To's impressive back catalogue:

> Set against a Tsimshatsui that never sleeps, among sultry neon lights and thousand shades of electric blue, a stolen police gun triggers a suspenseful chain of events that click into place like a Rubic's cube. Sir Sa, a fallen cop [*sic*] who just swaggered out of *The Bad Lieutenant*, endures The Longest Nite in his life. First his car gets vandalised, then his butt gets kicked. Suddenly he's wedged between two gangs on the brink of a bloodbath, while staving off investigations by both the Anti-Vice Squad [Organised Crime and Triad Bureau] and Homicide Unit [Criminal Investigation Department] embroiled in their own turf war. His only Lifeline is a maverick team of 'blue berets' (the titular Police Tactical Unit) which tries to recover his gun by hook or by crook. With all parties armed to the hilt converging at 4 p.m. [*sic* – it should be 4 a.m.]

he's Running Out of Time. A Hero Never Dies, but in Johnnie To's cynical world, the heroes are the bad guys, so up till the last frame, Expect the Unexpected![13]

Still 2 Tsim Sha Tsui — a district that never sleeps.

The above preview's reference to the 1998 film *The Longest Nite*, produced by To but directed by Patrick Yau with To's collaboration, is particularly germane to any discussion of *PTU*. Like *PTU*, the action of *The Longest Nite* is determined to a considerable extent by the temporal compression of the events — a rogue cop involved in a cat-and-mouse game with a professional hit man, who is in many respects his double — but the compression of time and plot in the later film is even more acute. Indeed one can always find echoes and thematic repetitions across To's body of work as a whole, so that to an extent we can consider To's approach to his films as a series of themes and variations played out from one picture to another. In *The Longest Nite* the action takes place in Macau over a period of twenty-four hours. The other similarity between the two movies is the portrayal of the cop whose strategies are based on the amoral belief in the ends justifying the means. As Teo has elucidated in his study of To's work, the *jianghu* (roughly translated as loyalty, brotherhood, etc.) themes which are woven into the very fabric of modern Hong Kong filmmaking have influenced To's creative ideas, as have

the *doppelgänger* motif of cop and robber as mirror images of each other (very much an important motif in *The Longest Nite*). Graphic violence and a deterministic, inexorable end-game are also very much ingredients of this earlier film. Whilst *PTU* presents a far more complex and ambivalent scenario regarding the use of violence necessitated by motives of self-preservation, it is clear that To's cinema is part of a discourse on violence and power, on professionalism and ethical responsibility in Hong Kong society. This is a post-1997 discourse shared by such films as the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy, but not by pre-1997 anxiety films, whose moral universe was significantly different.

In this connection, one of the purposes of the present study is to explore how To, especially in *PTU*, deconstructs the genre and character types of the established 'heroic bloodshed' Hong Kong tradition dating back to the 1980s and to John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* and Ringo Lam's *City on Fire* in particular. This is not to say that To is free of the formative influence of the representations offered by that ground-breaking sub-genre. The 1980s phenomenon coincided with To's gradual emergence as a fledgling filmmaker following his early TVB career, and it was natural for his development to be marked by such an important indigenous cinematic movement. However, the 'heroic bloodshed' genre, for all the excitement and originality it exuded, relied heavily on elements of Western cinema, including the graphic violence of Sam Peckinpah, and also on other Asian genres, such as the *wuxia* or martial arts film. Indeed, referring to the models for his characters in *A Better Tomorrow*, Woo cited a litany of Hollywood and French New Wave movie stars (especially the ultimately cool Alain Delon) as his idols.[14] Whether or not To sets out deliberately to dismantle this construction of the heroic idol, which has so much dominated Hong Kong popular culture, is open to debate, and my fourth and final chapter will discuss this question in greater depth. His preference for deconstructive, ironic comedy

and for semi-heroic or anti-heroic depictions certainly challenges the 'serious' conventions of the action film and the police thriller genres. Whilst this is not a consistent facet of To's filmmaking, such anti-heroic representation is integral to the highly acclaimed triad films, *Election I* and *II*. The major difference between the *Election* diptych and *PTU* is the former's skilful integration of character study with narrative by contrast with the earlier film's subordination of character to plot/action.

Moreover, like Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* and Jackie Chan's original *Police Story* (1985), *PTU* is quintessentially Hong Kong in subject matter. Perhaps more than either of these earlier films, it conveys the sense of a genuine Hong Kong locale to such an extent that one might even claim that Tsim Sha Tsui, where the film is set, is in a way the subject (or even the hero!) of the film. As we will see in the following chapter, To's skilfully constructed depiction of Tsim Sha Tsui succeeds in capturing a spirit of place that is more convincing than the superficial sense of locale suggested by many run-of-the-mill Hong Kong films. One of the most evocative screen portraits of the streets of Tsim Sha Tsui, especially those to the north between Nathan Road and Chatham Road, the film shows another side of Tsim Sha Tsui, during the early hours of the morning when only police patrols and potential criminals are on the streets. There are some almost surreal shots of shops and streets — in particular Tom Lee Music in Cameron Lane — eerily empty, unfamiliar and threatening. Another very recent Milkyway film, *Eye in the Sky* (2007), on which To is credited for duties on the production side, but in whose direction he was also involved creatively, offers a similarly atmospheric, well-crafted depiction of locale, but this time mainly set around Hong Kong–side's Central District.

Notes

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3. K. C. Lo, 'Transnationalisation of the Local in a Circular Structure' in K. C. Lo, *Chinese Face/Off — The Transnational Popular Culture of Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005, 106.
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6. Interview with Miles Wood in M. Wood, *Cine East*: *Hong Kong Cinema through the Looking-Glass*. London: FAB Press, 1998, 121.
7. Interview with Stephen Teo in S. Teo, *Director in Action—Johnnie To and the Hong Kong Action Film*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007.
8. Interview with Shirley Lau, *South China Morning Post*, May, 2003.
9. E. Cheshire, and J. Ashbrook, *Joel and Ethan Coen*. Pocket Essential Film, 2002, 8.
10. P. Fonoroff, *South China Morning Post*, 1.5.2003.
11. TJ review in *Time Out*, 4–10 July 2007.
12. Ibid.
13. 27th Hong Kong International Film Festival booklet, 8–23 April 2003, 13.
14. John Woo quoted in interview in Karen Fang's study of John's Woo *A Better Tomorrow*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004.
15. 'Et voilà. Maintenant le ressort est bandé. Cela n'a plus qu'à se dérouler tout seul ... Après, on n'a plus qu'à laisser faire ... Cela roule tout seul.' J. Anouilh, *Antigone*. Paris: Editions de la Table Ronde, 1946, 54.
16. S. Teo, *Director in Action*, 11.
17. D. Bordwell, 'Transcultural Spaces' in *Chinese-Language Film*, 148.
18. D. Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong — Popular Cinema and the Arts of Entertainment*. Cambridge, Mass. & London: Harvard University Press, 2000, 246.
19. S. Teo, Keynote speech in Conference on The Film Scene: Cinema, The Arts and Social Change, University of Hong Kong, April, 2005.
20. J. To in interview with the author, 20 August 2007.
21. D. Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong*, 131.

Chapter 2 'Into the Perilous Night' — Police and Gangsters in the Hong Kong Mean Streets

1. A. Abbas, *Hong Kong Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Unversity Press, 1997, 23.

2. L. Pun, 'The Emotional Map of Hong Kong Cinema' in @LOCATION, 75.
3. L. Pun, 'The Emotional Map', 77.
4. S. Teo, *Director in Action*, 129.
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Chapter 3 'Expect the Unexpected' — PTU's Narrative and Aesthetics

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3. E. Knörer, 'Ein Meisterwek der Konzentration' ('A masterpiece of concentration'), *Jump Cut*, http:// www.jump-cut.de/filmkritik-ptu.html/.

Chapter 4 The Coda: What's the Story? — Morning Glory!

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