

Director in Action

Johnnie To

and the Hong Kong Action Film

Stephen Teo



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— Britta Erickson, *The Art of Xu Bing*

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1

Introduction

Director and Genre

This monograph is a study of a genre and the work of a director in the contemporary Hong Kong cinema. The equation of genre and director opens a question about the nature of the Hong Kong film industry and its structure of genres. Since the industry employs filmmakers to achieve and consolidate its objective of entertainment and commerce, how does a director make use of and transcend the limitations of genre to make films of his own wishes and design?

The relationship between genre and director is an underdeveloped area of Hong Kong film studies. Much of the published studies of Hong Kong cinema focus either on genre or director but rarely examine the symbiosis between the two. From the point of view of genre theory, genre films tend to make themselves so long as the director follows the established rules and conventions of genre. The theoretical premise of this monograph is that the work of the director in focus, Johnnie To¹ (Chinese name: To Kei-fung in Cantonese, Du Qifeng in Mandarin), has affected and changed the nature of genre and its industry more so than the other way around. To's work in the genre of the action film was undertaken in a period of steady decline (from 1997 to 2005) in the Hong Kong film industry as Hong Kong itself was beset with economic and social malaise in the years following reunification with China in 1997. To secured his reputation largely through his direction of a series of off-beat action films set in the contemporary era, centring around the world of professional killers, criminals, triad gangsters and their policemen adversaries: *A Hero Never Dies* (1998), *Running out of Time* (1999), *The Mission* (1999), *Fulltime Killer* (2001), *Running out of Time 2* (2001), *PTU* (2003), *Breaking*

News (2004), *Election* (2005), *Election 2* (2006) and *Exiled* (2006). At the same time, To also produced and supervised (in some cases, actually directed), under the banner of Milkyway Image, the production company that he founded in 1996, an even more unusual series of action films directed by younger proteges: *Beyond Hypothermia* (1996), *Too Many Ways to Be Number One* (1997), *The Odd One Dies* (1997), *The Longest Nite* (1998), *Expect the Unexpected* (1998).

These films set an extraordinary record for To as the most distinctive and innovative director in Hong Kong cinema today. They merit a study of To as an auteur working specifically in the genre of the action film. For To, the action film genre gave him the space to build interesting narratives around his main concerns which are cinematic but also social and political. As such, there is an imperative to study To's action films in order not only to understand To's career in the Hong Kong cinema and the scope of his achievements as a director but also the genre as "experience and meaning", to use Barry Keith Grant's formulation of genre cognition.² Grant invokes the idea of genre films as "social myth ... directly related to lived experience, their traditions clearly connected to communal values".³ The action film genre represents in microcosm the cinematic range of To's career and the community of Hong Kong which moulds To's "lived experience". (To had also spent a formative part of his career in television, which falls outside the scope of this monograph.)

To has handled a variety of genres and he has directed action films of many kinds. As the term "action film" is a broad one, it is necessary to consider the term more closely and in the process, come up with inter-generic terms of reference within which we may assess To and his films. To's distinctiveness lies in marking out the differentials between the intertextual connotations of genre, as I hope to demonstrate below. His films can and are often referred to multifariously as the "gangster movie", the "cops and robbers movie", the "detective movie" (or "*policier*", to use the French term), the "crime movie", and other subsets and variations peculiar to the Hong Kong cinema — such as the "young triad movies" (*guhwozai pian*), "professional killer movies" (*shashou pian*), "hero movies" (*yingxiong pian*), and "black society movies" (*hei shehui pian*: the term "black society" being an euphemism for triads). Such arbitrary labelling can amount to pigeonholing and stereotyping which often confuses and does not reflect the intrinsic value of a genre.

How does one define action as an intrinsic value of the Hong Kong action film? Is action, in terms of pure action (defined as spectacle⁴), the meaning or the structure of the genre? Since action in the Hong Kong cinema is usually defined in terms of choreographic scenes of violence involving gunplay, swordplay, and martial arts, or a combination of all three, the term "action"

is thereby applicable to a wide range of genres — martial arts,⁵ comedy, horror, melodrama, and the gangster movie. The action films of Johnnie To can be defined under the name of one or many of all these genres, and this, apart from anything else, makes him a typical and representative Hong Kong director. But we are still somewhere short of a definitive understanding of the action film genre and from knowing how it stands vis-à-vis the director of this study. The chart below delimits the genre categories of To's action films forming the focus of this monograph:

Gangster (or triad) movies	Cops and robbers (or detective) movies	Professional or hired killer movies
<i>The Big Heat</i>	<i>The Big Heat</i>	<i>Beyond Hypothermia</i>
<i>Loving You</i>	<i>Loving You</i>	<i>The Odd One Dies</i>
<i>Too Many Ways to Be No. 1</i>	<i>The Longest Nite</i>	<i>The Longest Nite</i>
<i>The Odd One Dies</i>	<i>Expect the Unexpected</i>	<i>A Hero Never Dies</i>
<i>The Longest Nite</i>	<i>Running out of Time</i>	<i>The Mission</i>
<i>A Hero Never Dies</i>	<i>Running out of Time 2</i>	<i>Fulltime Killer</i>
<i>The Mission</i>	<i>PTU</i>	<i>Election 2</i>
<i>PTU</i>	<i>Breaking News</i>	<i>Exiled</i>
<i>Election</i>	<i>Running on Karma</i>	
<i>Election 2</i>	<i>Election</i>	
<i>Exiled</i>	<i>Election 2</i>	

The fact that some films appear in more than one category shows that there is considerable overlap between the categories (some appear to cross all three categories and these are perhaps the most representative action films in the To canon). (I have not categorised To's other films that will be analysed in this monograph, namely *The Heroic Trio*, *Lifeline*, *Needing You*, *Help!* and *Throw Down*, for the reason that they do not fall as neatly into the above categories, although their generic links with the action film will be dealt with in the upcoming chapters; and it is possible of course to form other sub-categories within the three above, e.g. *Running on Karma* could be classified in the sub-category of “serial-killer” movies or “muscular action” films). The element of arbitrariness in delimiting the genres above is compounded by the fact that they can all fall under the wider category of the “crime film”. Western critics denote the “gangster film”, the “detective film” and the “crime film” as discreet or distinctive genres,⁶ and they have a somewhat different understanding of the action film. Based on the empirical evidence of Hollywood products, James M. Welsh divides the action film into two categories: pure action and action-adventure. Welsh favours the latter as a

more cohesive category because it meets the definition “of a film genre that requires a recognizable iconography, coded characters designed to respond to dangerous situations in predictable ways, and clearly defined formula filmmaking”.⁷ To Welsh, the action-adventure category encompasses disaster pictures featuring spectacular visual effects, including Spielberg’s *Jurassic Park* (1993) and Cameron’s *Titanic* (1997), the films of John Woo and Richard Donner (the *Lethal Weapon* series), the Simpson-Bruckheimer films (*Top Gun* [1986], *The Rock* [1996], *Con Air* [1997]), and almost any kind of big-budget “testosterone movies” borrowing from “the film noir tradition involving an atmosphere of menace and a corrupt or corrupting city, past, present, or future”.⁸ The action genre appears to be quite a distinctive tradition of blockbuster adventure with film noir atmosphere but it appears also to be multi-generic. Similarly, Mark Gallagher asserts that “the action film constitutes a genre of its own” but that it “draws from other traditional film genres” such as the gangster film, the Western and the war film.⁹

I would argue that To’s action films with a cop and gangster background share a certain affinity with the Western more than any other genre. In one sense, the Western denotes the earliest generic mode of action cinema, invoked by the famous shot of the outlaw firing his gun into the camera in Edwin S. Porter’s *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), and in another sense, it denotes a certain relationship between Hollywood and the Hong Kong cinema: Hong Kong as a miniature Hollywood (the relationship here points to a sharing of generic properties in both cinemas as well as to the fact that the Hong Kong film industry was modelled after Hollywood). To’s films could be regarded as “urban Westerns”, with the “urban” denoting the “determinate space” of action (while the Western in itself denotes its own determinate space in the American frontier). The term is borrowed from Thomas Schatz, who gives a distinction between genres of “determinate space” (which includes Westerns, gangster and detective films) and those of “indeterminate space” (including musicals, screwball comedy, melodrama).¹⁰ Schatz’s definition of “determinate space” is a “symbolic arena of action” in which conflict over fundamental values is sustained within a familiar locale and enacted “according to a prescribed system of rules and behavioural codes”. By “indeterminate space”, Schatz means a civilized, ideologically stable milieu where there is no physical conflict but rather “attitudinal oppositions” which are more ideological and abstract.¹¹

Space in *The Mission*, *PTU*, *Breaking News*, *Election* and *Election 2*, is certainly determinate in the sense of being a limited, symbolic arena of action where conflict and resolution are played out according to a prescribed system of rules and codes. This immediately invokes the kind of mythic space which

the Chinese call the *jianghu* (literally, “rivers and lakes”), referring to the world in which triad-based gangsters, hired killers and even the police-detectives operate according to prescribed codes and rituals. The action is determined by these codes and rituals — as To demonstrates succinctly in *Election*. There is a parallel here with the literary world of romance where “the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended” and in which the hero must be portrayed as “doing something”, as Northrop Frye explains (the romance genre is thus defined “by the hero’s power of action”).¹² The hero’s “prodigies of courage and endurance, unnatural to us, are natural to him”.¹³

Certain Hong Kong critics have latterly coined the term “*jianghu* movies” to refer to the kind of action films that I am trying to define here (the 2004 release *Jianghu*, starring Andy Lau and Jacky Cheung, is the archetype marking the trend to rename the action-cum-gangster film in this culturally specific way, somewhat in the manner of the Japanese genre known as *yakuza*). I could well have used the terminology *jianghu* films as a metonym for “action films”, but to my mind, *jianghu* is much too broad and there is no determinate *jianghu* myth that defines the contemporary action film: a *jianghu* movie could just as well be a martial arts movie in the style of *wuxia* (the martial chivalry form). The *jianghu* myth is seen through the subjective points of view of filmmakers and arbitrarily categorized by critics and filmmakers equally, although it is true that the Hong Kong action film is driven by *jianghu* precepts such as the notion of *yi* (the sense of righteousness), loyalty, bonding, as evident in To’s *The Mission* and *PTU*, which can be seen as variations of earlier films based on the same precepts in both the gunplay-action format (such as John Woo’s *A Better Tomorrow*, *Hard Boiled*, Ringo Lam’s *City on Fire*) and in the swordplay and kung fu action format (Zhang Che’s *The Heroic Ones*, *Blood Brothers*, and many others).

The action film can be recognized by the *jianghu* myth and its precepts, but if *jianghu*-space is mythical and determinate at the same time, how is it manifested? For convenience, we might see the *jianghu*-space in the same urban dimensions as the urban Western, where the urbanity of the space connotes a certain type of action, as well as a certain apparatus of action. In *Election* and *Election 2*, the *jianghu* codes proscribe the use of guns and these two films may in this sense be excluded from the realm of the urban Western, but if guns were only a stylistic feature of the action film, their absence in the two films is immaterial. According to John Cawelti, the urban Western is a genus which “frequently requires a group and elaborate technology”.¹⁴ To’s films, including *Election* and *Election 2*, are models of this requirement. They are all about the group operating in urban settings with the elaborate implements of modern technology forming what I will call the “infrastructure

of violence”: cars, lifts, elevators, mobile phones, TV, the internet, and above all, guns. Guns are not immaterial to the majority of To’s action films and ought to be placed at the centre of this infrastructure of violence. On the one hand, they are practically synonymous with the action film, and on the other, as Jason Jacobs claims, the “cinema and gunfire had *always* been intertwined”.¹⁵ It is guns that clarify the analogy of To’s urban action films with urban Westerns.



Still 1.1 A professional gun hand: A scene from *The Mission*

Robert Warshow also sees an unmistakable association between the Western and the gangster-action film, and the crucial link is the use of guns. He declares: “The two most successful creations of American movies are the gangster and the Westerner: men with guns”.¹⁶ Insofar as To’s action films are about men with guns, they are an amalgamation of the gangster film and the Western.¹⁷ “Guns as physical objects, and the postures associated with their use form the visual and emotional center of both types of films”, Warshow asserts.¹⁸ He could be talking about *A Hero Never Dies*, *The Mission*, *PTU* and *Breaking News* — all true urban Westerns, all with gangsters in them, and all featuring emotional relationships between protagonists and adversaries that are “fundamentally bound up with the gunfire itself” (as Jason Jacobs comments on the central relationship between the two cops in John Woo’s *Hard-Boiled*¹⁹). To’s heroes are typical modern gunfighters, evoking a cult or a mystique described by Richard Slotkin in the context of the American Western as “a style of action more appropriate to a certain kind of world-view (which) is essentially ‘hardboiled’: the world is a hostile place, human motives are rarely good, and outcomes depend not on right but on the proper deployment of might”.²⁰

To’s hardboiled urban settings can be interpreted as a Western frontier, complete with all its mythic proportions as well as its propensity for crime and violence. Might rules in this hostile environment, but To’s films do not



Still 1.2 A scene typical of the urban Western, from *Breaking News*

lack a moral, ethical dimension of violence. The urban Western denotes violence as a natural corollary of guns, but it is the emotional relationships bound up with gunfire that determines the nature of violence. Jacobs writes essentially about the aesthetics of gunfire sequences (exemplified by the last shootout in Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*), and I will make the point that the violence in To's films is a manifestation of *mythical violence*, in other words, aestheticized as myth (more on mythical violence later). Jacobs also notes that gunfire is gender-specific. "Gunfire sequences offer particular pleasures for men, pleasures which often cannot be found elsewhere".²¹ To's gunfire action films are certainly male-specific and emit homosocial and homoerotic pleasure as a natural part of what Richard Dyer calls "the masculine structure of feeling" in the action film.²² Though it is tempting to take this masculine structure for granted, To's films consciously or unconsciously pose a question about violence and its association with men, highlighting what Yvonne Tasker calls "the politics of representation in terms of the construction and dissolution of categories for identification within the cinema".²³ The masculine structure in To's films is not as solidly conceived as it might seem, and some critics have shown that it does occasionally crumble, supporting their claim that To's films in fact exhibit a "crisis of masculinity".²⁴

Jacobs suggests that gunfire sequences offer a broader pleasure which is "less gender-specific and more universal than it might at first seem".²⁵ He writes, "the profoundest desire and deepest pleasure in ... gunfire sequences (lies) in the will to fight back, to gain mastery over one's life even in circumstances so desperate and agonised".²⁶ Gunfire sequences give us "genuine dramas of mastery and loss" and that if they "do reflect male pleasures and anxieties, this is because in a patriarchal world men have more to lose".²⁷ While To's action films are overwhelmingly a male domain, as To himself will be the first to admit, women are always present and sometimes play a central role in the action (as in *Breaking News*) or a subversive one that

ultimately threatens the existence of the homosocial group (as in *The Mission*). The presence of women in To's films, including *A Hero Never Dies*, *The Mission*, *PTU*, *Breaking News*, offsets the overwhelming masculinity of violence, serving as symbols to standardize male anxiety in the patriarchal environment and the "will to fight back" — in *PTU* and *Breaking News*, the will to fight back works on both sides of the gender divide. Violence and gender are intertwined in this respect, as a denominator of To's preoccupation with male anxiety and the thrust of fatalism as a male drive.

On the question of violence, it is pertinent to identify the nature of violence in To's films. Whereas violence is generally conveyed through gunfire, not a single gun is fired in *Throw Down*, *Election* and *Election 2*, although the films are not less violent for that. *Election* and *Election 2* are violent in a highly surreal fashion — and here it is important to remember the determinate, mythical space of the *jianghu* in which the violence takes place. The violence in To's films serves to remind us of Walter Benjamin's notion of "mythical violence", outlined in his essay "Critique of Violence".²⁸ Benjamin uses the concept as a meta-critique — a form of violence that critiques the violence in our midst, and To's violent action films are an implicit meta-critique of violence, all the more so when we recognize the violence as mythical violence in the *jianghu* of Hong Kong and other Asian hot spots. The question of violence will be dealt with in greater detail in the relevant chapters on specific films, in particular the postscript on *Election* and *Election 2*.



Still 1.3 A hero gets his gun, from *The Odd One Dies*

So far, we have identified guns and violence as generic ingredients of the action film which are moreover gender-specific. Guns, as phallic symbols, define the masculine value of action on the one hand, but seemingly also the *intrinsic* value of action on the other hand — much more than movement,

which is implied as the basic property of the “action film” when translated into Chinese (*dongzuo pian*). Movement (*dongzuo*) as an idea in itself is insufficient to define action, which is why an important tradition in Chinese literary criticism of martial arts novels is the distinguishing of the specific type of action linked to weaponry, whether it is “swords” (*pudao*) or “clubs or cudgels” (*gan bang*), or “kung fu”, and so on. Aaron Anderson considers movement as a primary value of action but associates movement with martial arts (movement is martial movement).²⁹ Anderson pushes the idea of movement as a physical recreation of “muscular memory”, a notion highly pertinent to the Chinese martial arts where practitioners mimic and repeat movements, committing them to memory.³⁰ Nicole Brenez takes the concept further to accentuate kinetics as a theory of psychic energy: “movement is not a tool but a value in Asian action cinema”.³¹ The value of movement lies in a spiritual process of “alteration and metamorphosis”: “The kinetic principle makes it clear that it is not in the actual move, but in the figurative embrace of impossible motions in a possible body”.³² According to Brenez, there are three basic temporal aspects of cinema that are captured in movement: mobility and immobility, instantaneity and accumulation, singularity and overlapping.³³ One might point to To’s action set-pieces in *The Mission* and *PTU* to illustrate the spiritual energy of stasis within movement: in *The Mission*, his protagonists stand motionless with their hands poised horizontally at ready to fire guns; in *PTU* they react to on-coming bullets impacting their bodies by staying upright and firing back.

The association with gunplay in the majority of To’s action films clarifies the kind of action-movement based on weaponry. This dimension of weaponry yielding action-movement is otherwise missing in the use of other nomenclatures, such as “adventure film”, “film noir” or indeed “urban Western” (which implies in the first instance a cityscape movie). I have considered To’s films as “urban Westerns”, which is a form conducive to gender-specificity and to guns and violence, but since “urban Westerns” only “resemble the Western”, according to Cawelti,³⁴ To’s action films are implicitly different from the Western in both a cultural and generic sense. Yvonne Tasker makes the point that while the roots of the urban action film may lie in the Western, its changed location significantly alters that tradition.³⁵ Tasker conflates action and adventure to suggest that action is much more concerned with spectacle while adventure is more concerned with narrative.³⁶

To’s films may certainly be seen as adventure *stories* but it seems inappropriate to call them “adventure films” insofar as the action-adventure combination now mostly denotes the hyperbolic blockbuster style with “an emphasis in performance on athletic feats and stunts”, as Steve Neale

indicates,³⁷ while Tasker sees action-adventure films as a near-parodic form that she calls “muscular cinema” featuring the likes of Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, or Bruce Willis. In her book, *Spectacular Bodies*, Tasker isolates “muscular cinema” as a contemporary form dating essentially from the 1980s.³⁸ The action films of this kind, supposedly exerting a strong influence on Hong Kong and other cinemas, are “bound up in the body of the hero and the masculine identity that it embodies”.³⁹ Here, the issue of masculine identity once again reaffirms the gender-specificity of the action genre. To’s action films, however, are far less muscular (*Running on Karma* features a hero in a muscular body suit which is manifestly a parody of muscular cinema) and even if they celebrate masculine group identity in classic male-bonding, homosocial fashion (*The Mission*), they also demonstrate vulnerability and a kind of intellectual fatalism not often invoked in the muscular cinema (*Expect the Unexpected* is exemplary in this regard).

To’s heroes are far more subtle and the action is far more abstract. In short, To’s action films are more like art films in the vein of Jean-Pierre Melville rather than James Cameron. Here we might consider the “art action film” as a separate category — the action genre fused with the art film, which is itself a distinctive mode of film practice, following David Bordwell.⁴⁰ The art action film foregrounds To as the auteur of action films. The word *auteur* itself confers an art film mode of cinematic practice, or at least a mode of film that is atypical from normal practice. Peter Wollen uses the expression “auteur film” to denote a group of films — the work of one director — that somehow exists independently from many other factors, generic or otherwise.⁴¹ I will dwell on To’s auteur status shortly, but the conspicuous personalization of the genre in such films as *The Mission*, *PTU*, *Breaking News*, *Election* reveals To as the “shaping narrative intelligence”.⁴² Their narrative and artistic achievements may even be demeaned by the “high-concept” sheen of action-adventure films as big-budget “testosterone movies”, although they would be elevated when the film noir tradition, such as Welsh describes it in connection with the action-adventure film, is raised inasmuch as the films are urban films containing a psycho-pathological element in the characterizations.

Thus while the idea of adventure stories clearly applies to To’s action films, it is more useful to think of adventure not as a genre but as a *narrative mode*, as Tasker suggests, in contrast to action as spectacle, marked with special effects⁴³ (my reservation in fully accepting Tasker’s point lies in the fact that action in To’s films is portrayed less as spectacle — or if it is that, it is a very different, restrained, kind of spectacle — in the same way that his heroes are far less muscular). In fact, the film noir framework of To’s urban adventures put his films squarely into the tradition of psychological thrillers where the

predominantly male characters are brought down by their weaknesses, wounds, infirmities, and fears. In this sense, To's films belong firmly to the category of action film as a "body genre" if not as muscular cinema: the body as a physical site of pain and emotion as well as an instrument of violence on which the question of gender can be raised as a contrast to the highly emotional circumstances of the action, whether induced by gunfire or not.⁴⁴ Tasker points out, "it is in forms like the action cinema (where) both male and female protagonists are often defined by their *physicality*" (original emphasis).⁴⁵ By physicality, Tasker probably means the stylization and choreographic design inherent in actions of violence, which can only be manifested on the body and performed by the actors' bodies. The affect of violence is aestheticized, like a ballet or dance. On the other hand, as Tasker and other writers have shown, the body conveys certain ambiguities about gender notions of action. From a feminist perspective, the frequency of illnesses and infirmities afflicting To's primarily male bodies can only be seen as a put down of the male heroic tradition (cf. *Loving You*, *Lifeline*, *A Hero Never Dies*, *Running out of Time*, *Help!*, *Throw Down*) — but perhaps only to emphasize the male plight of fighting back in a perennial physical and spiritual struggle capped by the fatalistic awareness of, and even insistence on, death.⁴⁶

The strain of fatalism marking the noir milieu of To's films — "Kowloon Noir" as I will call it — can be understood as the dark side of masculine values. Kowloon Noir therefore is To's paradoxical take on fate in the action film, a site populated mostly by men who bond in millennial fatalistic fashion and among whom the women stick out like sore thumbs (cf. *The Mission*, *PTU* and *Breaking News*). Traditionally, film noir portrays fate in the form of the *femme fatale* but fate in To's films is akin to the "Destiny-machine", a term employed by Tom Gunning to refer to "larger, impersonal and often sinister systems" bearing down on the characters in the films of Fritz Lang.⁴⁷ A similar Destiny-machine bears upon all of To's characters such that no one survives in a work like *Expect the Unexpected*. I will appropriate Gunning's term to suggest a timeless conceit of fate intruding into our modern age to affect — and recall into oblivion — the male and female protagonists of To's films, while Gunning employs the term to refashion the thematic idea of fate in Lang's cinema as "a profound insight to modernity" so as not to make fate appear an old-fashioned metaphysical conceit.⁴⁸ However, fate is an autonomous, synchronic conceit, if also a changeable entity, and it will find various manifestations in To's films. In the generic field of Kowloon Noir, To works to alter and shift the priorities of the Destiny-machine, mostly to shape and influence the male heroic principles of the Hong Kong cinema in other generic realms of action.



Still 1.4 Kowloon Noir: the heart of To's darkness

Kowloon Noir is perhaps best seen as a sub-category of the action film sublimating the genre itself as well as the largely male characters of To's action cinema. Kowloon Noir is given shape primarily by To in the Hong Kong action cinema. It is highly localized noir (the typical setting being Kowloon, as exemplified by *PTU* and *Breaking News*),⁴⁹ both a conceptual field and a style of action cinema where the characters exist in a network of shifting alliances, cross-alliances, misalliances, coincidences. It is neither old nor new noir, but certainly contemporary and of its time, the events always unfolding in the present from start to finish. The archetypal Kowloon Noir films *The Mission*, *PTU*, *Breaking News* have no flashbacks, no past recollections, only hints or traces of backstories that resonate on present relationships and circumstances: there is thus little of the mood of *temps perdu* which is one of the stylistics of American film noir noted by Paul Schrader.⁵⁰ As Kowloon Noir is resolutely a time-period of the present, there is a historical underpinning to its dark elements, making it not only allegorical but often directly critical of the times. One stylistic it therefore shares with generic film noir is the element of compositional tension, as opposed to physical action. As Schrader explains, a typical film noir “would rather move the scene cinematographically around the actor than have the actor control the scene by physical action”.⁵¹ Any one of the action set pieces in *The Mission*, *PTU* and *Breaking News* would attest to this principle. Compositional tension, I would suggest, is also increased, however fleetingly, by the presence of women in Kowloon Noir, making the films somewhat variable as an action genre. The “measured pacing, restrained anger, and oppressive compositions” (Schrader's words⁵²) suggest dark feminine values engulfing the male-dominant genre.

A case could be made to identify To's action films as melodramas. Using James Cameron's *True Lies* as his model, Gallagher argues that, “By synthesizing traditionally male and female genres, action films shape violence into affect and reconfigure emotional displays as violent spectacles”.⁵³ Tasker



Still 1.5 A portrait of feminine cool in *Breaking News*

declares that “to the extent that action is a mode, it is clearly a melodramatic one”.⁵⁴ The quality of excess, an accent on domesticity or the family, social and personal conflicts (often between male and female roles), characterize the melodramatic mode of the action film. Based on these criteria, To’s films are clearly melodramatic: *Casino Raiders II*, *The Big Heat*, *The Heroic Trio*, *Loving You*, *Lifeline*, *The Odd One Dies*, *Expect the Unexpected*, *Where a Good Man Goes*, *Fulltime Killer*, *Running on Karma*, *Election*, *Election 2*, and *Exiled*. However, we are only speaking of a *melodramatic mode* of the action film, where action is manifested and supported by melodramatic excess, such as the scene of Andy Lau in *Casino Raiders II* crashing his motorboat onto a pier to save his girlfriend Wu Chien-lien from being drowned by the villain and his thugs (the boat explodes causing a frenzied series of explosions all around the pier clearly mirroring the hero’s emotions and the violence perpetrated on his woman).

One may well ask whether there is an *action mode* of the melodrama and what the characteristics would be. Perhaps there is no difference. However, the inscription of gender politics into the genre by feminist critics, making melodrama identifiably a female genre, designates a genderized mode of action film, which applies to a handful of To’s works (*The Heroic Trio* and its sequel *Executioners* could be described as “female action films”) but not to the bulk of his action output. Some of To’s male-centered films feature strong female roles which function to pacify the male heroes or drain them of testosterone, as in *Where a Good Man Goes* and *Running on Karma*. However, the term melodrama, given its association with “women’s pictures”, may not sufficiently capture the male-centeredness of To’s action pictures. The term might even deny the male-specificity of his films, with their attendant homosocial, homoerotic qualities.

Finally, if masculinity, as with violence, is the prerequisite of To’s action films, then one could point to his body as the final arbiter of action. In this monograph, we are looking at the body of the auteur, in both a metaphorical

sense and in the sense of a body of work: the essence of the auteur theory, as Wollen reminds us, is the structural analysis of a group of films forming the singular work of a singular director.⁵⁵ It is the “body” of Johnnie To as the auteur in action that determines the special artistic and violent characteristics of the action. His “body of work” encapsulates the auteur’s body in its physical, psychological and aesthetic dimensions — and we will go on now to consider just how To shapes up as an auteur vis-à-vis the genre.

The *Auteur* Function

The correlation of a director with a certain genre along the lines of Alfred Hitchcock and the Suspense Film, John Ford and the Western, Preston Sturges and Comedy, King Hu and the *wuxia* (martial chivalry) film, allows us to perceive the genre film through the eye of the director. The director’s style and *mise-en-scène*, his understanding and interpretation of the genre are a window of opportunity for us to engage the genre with more “auteuristic specificity”, indicating those special qualities that an auteur brings to genre films. Genre theorists such as Stephen Neale consider genre from the perspective of “cinematic specificity” indicating the special qualities of narrative codes specific to cinema.⁵⁶ These codes derive from a “supra-textual” layer of production (the codes seemingly infinite and self-perpetuating), while it would seem to me that the intervention of the auteur — in the mode of what I have characterized as the “auteur in action” — is crucial in the modulation and the transformation of the codes to make them cinematic. It is the rationale of this monograph that we may therefore refer to those functions specific to the auteur and his role in mediating, altering and transforming the codes of genre.⁵⁷

In genre theory, the director is not the causal source of genre. The question with which I am occupied is not who or what causes genre, rather it is the question of the outcome of the synchronic combination of the shifting elements which I epitomize as the binary positions and functions of director and genre. One could say that it is the combination of producer, writer, director, actors, the director of photography, the production designer, etc, interacting with the codes and conventions of genre that fashion a film. In referring to To as the auteur, I mean that he encompasses a variety of roles and egos: he possesses the egoistic elements of the writer, for example (in his case, he has a team of writers working to his specifications); he controls the actors and the director of photography; directs the production designer, determines the set-ups and the *mise-en-scène*; and, as producer, has final cut

on most of his pictures. Some of these ego-functions are deliberately obfuscated in certain productions (for example, in the Milkyway films which To produced, he seemed to revel in the function of a hidden auteur). From this combination of director and genre, I hope to arrive at To's *auteur* function, a slight rephrasing of Foucault's "author-function" from the English-translated version of his essay "What Is an Author?" The focus of the *auteur* function is on the film director as an identifiable subject (a privileged position occupied by Johnnie To as the "author" of his films), so as to open up this discourse on the films of Johnnie To and a wider discourse on the Hong Kong cinema. For Foucault, the author-function arises because

the name of the author remains at the contours of texts — separating one from the other, defining their form, and characterizing their mode of existence. It points to the existence of certain groups of discourse and refers to the status of this discourse within a society and culture. The author's name is not a function of a man's civil status, nor is it fictional; it is situated in the breach, among the discontinuities, which gives rise to new groups of discourse and their singular mode of existence.⁵⁸

The *auteur* function is at the centre of the film texts in this study, with genre occupying a subordinate position coordinated into the texts, although as I will discuss below, genre exerts a constraint. One of the characteristics of the "author-function" denoted by Foucault is that it is not "defined by the spontaneous attribution of a text to its creator, but through a series of precise and complex procedures".⁵⁹ To's *auteur* function is a seminal process of precise and complex procedures of enunciating texts. Enunciator is a term used by Tom Gunning to describe Fritz Lang. The director as enunciator "need not be thought of as a Judaeo-Christian creator *ex nihilo*", Gunning writes, "but as an Aristotelian demi-urge who works with pre-existent material, and the nature of that material will always function as one of the causes of the creation".⁶⁰ Johnnie To might not be an Aristotelian demi-urge (he is perhaps a Deleuzian *bodhisattva*), but one can follow Gunning's logic to determine his *auteur* status as an enunciator of pre-existent material. In this process, we can ascertain, 1) the *auteur* qualities specific to Johnnie To as the director of the action films that constitute the subject of this monograph, 2) the modalities of the genre characteristics, and indeed the nomination of genres, a complex procedure as we have seen above and a task made all the more difficult because no one has come up with any definitive study of the genres of Hong Kong cinema,⁶¹ and 3) the discourses within Hong Kong society and its film culture that the films generate.

To's auteur function as enunciator makes him a paradox insofar as he apparently submits to the system or an orthodoxy of cultural values and questions them at the same time. His paradoxical role can be seen in those films which portray male values of dominance and homosocial solidarity but where he also disrupts the very existence of such values. Some critics dismiss To's films as crude and misogynistic, wholly celebrating male dominance and homosocial values — which is of course simplistic and short-sighted. His films are far more complex, as I have endeavoured to show above and will demonstrate in the following chapters, and their complexity stems from his auteur function as enunciator. His complexity also lies partly in his personality. To's films are complex because they are highly idiosyncratic. They all exert a certain quality that can only be identified as the personal touch of To. In part, this idiosyncrasy is the result of To working in a non-traditional way, that is, as seen from the vantage point of the Hollywood system. In this sense the Hong Kong cinema as a miniature Hollywood gives better scope to the filmmaker to make more personal or idiosyncratic films and probably explains why To has so far resisted the allure of working in the real Hollywood. Idiosyncrasy is essentially cultural, and the other rationale of this monograph is to consider the cultural specificity of the correlation between To and the action genre. As an auteur, it is part of To's function to enunciate the cultural specificity of the work, and to substantiate a discourse on the local-cultural codes which operate either consciously or sub-consciously in determining the narratives of genre films. It could be this local-cultural aspect of his idiosyncratic style that also explains why To remains very much a "Hong Kong director" in all senses of the term.

"Cultural specificity" renders a special coating to the films in terms of the cultural codes of discourse. It determines the way the films respond to the specific urban culture of Hong Kong, and how the characters' behaviour drive the pacing and rhythm of the narratives: these are the issues informing my analysis of the films throughout this monograph. Both the autorial function and the cultural specificity of the work are the engines of To's idiosyncratic enunciations transforming his action genre films into artistic achievements. An average run-of-the-mill director might merely have relied on the formula and conventions of the genre to produce passable entertainment. The equation between To and the action film operates on the principle that To is the necessary coefficient by which the variable x of the action film is multiplied to increase the genre's artistic and other excess value. Here the imagery of gunfire is a crucial denotation of To's auteur function inasmuch as human agency is needed to fire guns (guns don't fire themselves). To's status as both producer and director of his action films affords us a model

of studying a genre through the more uniform prism of the auteur and his idiosyncrasies — by this book’s definition, an auteur is an idiosyncratic artist.

The Constraint of Genre

The proposition that To is an auteur has to be weighed against genre theory since, as Stephen Neale warns, genre itself is a constraint against the notion of auteurism. Neale ascribes auteurism to high culture but declares that it is inappropriate

within the field of popular culture simply because the production conditions ... are marked by certain constraints. Among those constraints are the conventions of genre and certain forms of dramatic narrative, which act to mediate between the artist’s self and the audience he/she addresses. Such constraints exist only because of the specific economic conditions or production, distribution and exhibition within the commercial cinema and of the size and heterogeneity of the audience involved, and hence because of the pressure on the one hand to facilitate ‘communication’ and on the other hand to maximise the profitability of capital assets and to repeat the formulae making previous financial successes.⁶²

Neale also argues that “All forms of signification and meaning entail pressure” and that no one is free of this pressure. By “signification and meaning”, Neale is codifying genre as an integral part of commercial cinema, which *ipso facto* cuts out the auteur. The auteur-artist “is free of the constraints of commerce and of the conventional and formulaic nature of commercially oriented aesthetic forms”.⁶³ Neale’s syllogistic argument holds that popular cinema is inappropriate for auteurism because of economic constraints, and because genre is denominated within popular cinema, the auteur is free of genre. Neale regards popular culture as the natural seat of genre but though he allows for the possibility of self-expression, directors are seen as somewhat unthinking craftsmen driven by scopophilia and fetishistic desire who fill in lack “across the instance of the image itself” through *mise-en-scène*, colour, composition and framing.⁶⁴

Seemingly, auteurs, a different breed altogether in Neale’s view, are somehow proscribed from the “drives and structures” of genre — their purpose being a higher form of culture driven by “personal vision, worldview and individual style”.⁶⁵ For Neale, it is inappropriate to equate genre with

auteurism because genre is popular culture, and genre entails pressure. The genre of the action film, as commentators like Tasker and Arroyo have noted, has particularly low status because of its emphasis on spectacle. The genre is generally regarded with contempt by critics.⁶⁶ But even if we accept the distinction between high culture and popular culture, there is no reason to believe that the auteur is free of anything, and that high culture is not constrained by the same production conditions that befall popular culture (Orson Welles's *Othello* and *Don Quixote* are good examples of high culture constrained by production conditions, unless one were to argue that Welles took a decidedly low culture approach to Shakespeare and Cervantes).

The specific economic conditions of the commercial Hong Kong film industry and those of its distribution and exhibition sectors could certainly result in constraints that act as "a counterweight to auteurism".⁶⁷ But I would argue that the reverse could also occur with the filmmaker utilizing the industry's production conditions to free himself. Constraint can cut both ways, and To as his own producer and as a vital player in the industry (who enforces constraints in his own right) can be said to have harnessed the limitations of the Hong Kong film industry to his advantage. To called his series of action films, *The Mission*, *PTU*, *Breaking News*, "exercises" — indicating more experimental, formalistic works that he undertook in between commercial products. Broadly defined, these films are "major works", a corpus, according to Todorov, which creates, "in a sense a new genre and at the same time transgresses the previously valid rules of the genre".⁶⁸ To this extent, genre conventions and dramatic narratives can only be mediated through the auteur, they do not wedge themselves willy-nilly between the auteur and his audience, blocking the progress of transgression and change. To's auteur "exercises" fully justify Nicole Brenez's claim that "in the industrial field, nothing now seems closer to experimental research than the action cinema of Hong Kong".⁶⁹

Where production conditions are marked by constraints, the conventions of genre can provide the liberating conditions for the auteur to move around or even transcend the constraints. Genre theory and its "specificities" on narrative modes carry the modalities for change, alteration or modification according to historical conditions and the intervention of the auteur and other agents of change (who are themselves marked by history). Gunfire, for example, connotes the susceptibility of To's action films to become "urban Westerns", but such susceptibility would be meaningless without acknowledging To's auteur-function which puts the change into operation, and in other instances exchanges gunfire for a more abstract form of action, as in the judo movie *Throw Down* which is more a symbolic action film, or

the eschewal of guns completely in *Election* and *Election 2*, which makes the violence in those films more primitive. To's auteur-function allows him to skirt around the constraints of the economic system (not to mention other constraints in the form of immanent cultural differences between genres, e.g. the Western and the Hong Kong urban action-adventure), to set the conditions for and implement the change.

To could only have fulfilled this function by remaining embedded within the popular culture industry and its genres. Thus by definition he can't be called a "high culture" artist. To in fact grew up in an environment of criminal and gangster activity in the Kowloon Walled City and in such notorious "gangland" districts as Lok Fu and Ngau Tak Kok in the Kowloon part of Hong Kong.⁷⁰ His action films, as Meaghan Morris has observed of Hong Kong films in general, "are full of lumpen-proletarians, ... street-fighters, bodyguards, hired muscle, hitmen, prostitutes ... trying to survive with the only assets they have, their bodies, their beliefs, and their street-smarts".⁷¹ While I hesitate to call To a lumpen-proletarian artist, he is a "worker in the key structural position of producing commodities" and one who knows "that he *himself* is a commodity".⁷² Drawing on Lukács, Morris explains that such a worker "is in a position to apprehend the totality of concrete relations under capitalism and he is also in a position to do something about it".⁷³ This is ultimately the basis of To's auteur-function, but the "totality of concrete relations under capitalism" also influences the efficacy of To's auteur-function. If anything, he should be called an uneven auteur whose essential characteristics are attenuated across genres.

That the quality of unevenness is yet consistent with auteurship is not at all strange in auteur theory. Wollen shows that auteur criticism is based on a system of oppositions, "a whole series of shifting variations" in the work of an auteur.⁷⁴ He cites the work of Howard Hawks, which is divided into male-dominant action adventures and "crazy comedies" which are like the inverse of the former. To's unevenness works in the same way: he makes action films and crazy comedies, which are sometimes hard to reconcile with each other. The movies are "still the bastard child of art", Robert Warshaw writes, "and if in the end they must be made legitimate, it will be a changed household of art that receives them".⁷⁵ To's films constitute a "bastard child of art" by their very nature of unevenness: a result of his reliance on popular culture which compels him to follow the rules of whatever genre is popular, changing with the circumstances as he too attempts to change the rules of the genre. In a very real sense, the Hong Kong cinema is a changed household of artistic (and generic) bastards. (The view of To as an uneven auteur will be explored in Chapter 5.)

Neale is concerned with articulating a general theory of genre; he submits that genre is a system of “structuralist auteurism” that implies, indeed celebrates, the absence of the author. A general theory of genre is not the subject of this monograph, rather it is concerned with the auteur-function of To and how the auteur theory may be applied to a specific narrative mode of genre film to attempt several discourses — on the auteur-function, on the “cultural specificity” and on the “generic specificity” of the action film. Genre is subjected to the idiosyncratic treatment of an auteur, Johnnie To, working within the economic conditions of the Hong Kong film industry and the “constraints” they generate. To is both a producer and a director (in theory, one who constrains and the other who is constrained), and in the application of the auteur theory to To, it would seem to me that his particular role and standing in the Hong Kong film industry already modifies the theory to his specifications. His career is an apt demonstration of David Bordwell’s contention that “the compromises of business do not prevent mass entertainment from achieving genuine artistry”.⁷⁶ The Hong Kong cinema can achieve genuine artistry only because it does not lack auteurs.

The problem however is that To’s position as an auteur is tied to genre as both a focal and dispersal point of texts and discourses, but I contend that it is here, “situated in the breach, among the discontinuities”, that we may understand To as an uneven auteur and through this discourse of the vagaries of genre, better appreciate him as the singular auteur of a particular mode of genre film. The problem lies therefore in genre, being malleable, susceptible to change and to bending. The confusion in identification of genres may be a consequence of factors precipitated by the practice of genre mixing or genre-bending, a very old practice, as Rick Altman points out. He views this practice as a “discursive problem”, meaning that the perception of genre mixing stems more from the way in which films “have been described, categorised and labelled” by critics, industry insiders and publicists and channelled to the public.⁷⁷ On such a premise, we must allow for the possibility that cultural-linguistic specificities play a role in the identification of Hong Kong film genres and that they may foster misunderstanding and misperception in critical genre studies.

As the Hong Kong cinema, like Hollywood cinema, works on the principle of mixing and integrating whatever genre is commercially successful with other genres (kung fu fused to comedy, gangster films to adventure films, horror to martial arts, and so on), we must consider that historical changes in the social and industrial infrastructure will determine the pace and extent of genre mixing. Definitions of genre therefore shift and change as the infrastructural history advances in time. Both the filmmakers and the critics

deliberately avoid specificity as a characteristic of the changes in the infrastructure and this is particularly manifest in the Hong Kong cinema where the industry seeks to add novelty to old genres by mixing genres, and critics play along by subscribing to the industry's notions and descriptions of genre (and among academic circles, to redefine these genres), yielding the problematic ambiguity of Hong Kong genre cinema.

We can either see a genre movie taking a life of its own because, as Neale has stated, it revolves around “particular matters of expression and the codes that traverse them”,⁷⁸ where the movie is churned out by the industrial machine with the director functioning only as anonymous journeyman; or we can follow Jameson and see a genre movie as a work of “an individual consciousness to his historical circumstances, and as such, dependent on the vicissitudes of individual life”.⁷⁹ On the last proposition, the matters of expression and codes are a pretext for how a director expresses himself, often to change or subvert the codes, and to substantiate an “ideological-generic structure”, in the words of Robin Wood.⁸⁰ Wood takes the view that it is only through “the medium of the individual that ideological tensions come into particular focus, hence become of aesthetic as well as sociological interest”.⁸¹ When these tensions interact with the “defined particularities” of the auteur in certain works, these works are of “especial interest”.⁸² To's works locate political and ideological tensions in the context of the action film and are therefore of especial interest. He is the most recent director in a line of Hong Kong directors (others being John Woo, Ringo Lam, Tsui Hark) who have achieved distinction through redrawing the codes of the genre and revising the gangster movie mythology with novel cinematic means and innovative *mise-en-scène*, and articulating the politics and tensions of gangsters, cops, professional hired killers or heroes.

To's role in this discourse on the genre film and the Hong Kong cinema therefore stems from the “infrastructural history” of the Hong Kong film industry. It does not rest solely on his creative contribution to the action film genre but also on his presence during an unpropitious period in the development of the Hong Kong cinema in the last decade of the twentieth century. It was To who filled in the aesthetic gaps in the genre opened up by the migration of action directors such as John Woo, Kirk Wong, Ringo Lam and Tsui Hark to Hollywood. With the absence of these directors in the Hong Kong film industry (though Lam and Tsui have since moved back to Hong Kong), it was To who continued the tradition of the action film that is character-oriented and aesthetically distinguished. This monograph retraces the history of To's achievements within the genre and poses a historicist connection between To, the action film genre, and the Hong Kong

film industry. It is no accident that To turned to the action genre when the industry went into decline, for the genre was traditionally thought of as one of those commercial forms guaranteed to put life back into the industry and pull it out of its slump. But the task of reviving the industry through the genre fell into the hands of To in the post-97 epoch mainly because those directors who had made their names in the genre before him were no longer around to feed and nurture it in its most difficult period (the industry having fallen into an even deeper slump in 1997 following the handover and the outbreak of the Asian financial crisis).

The critical prominence that To has earned in the genre is an inevitable consequence of history and circumstance, having come about as a result of a congruence of historical factors, genre evolution and his own presence. For To, the end of the 1990s was a fortuitous time although he had been around in the industry for quite a while. In fact, To's career as a film director encompasses at least three periods in the Hong Kong cinema of the last twenty-five years. His very first film, *The Enigmatic Case*, was released back in 1980, when he was only 25. He then disappeared from the filmmaking scene, re-emerging in 1986, and quickly established himself as one of the industry's top commercial directors. Though he was commercially successful, To's critical record remained mixed for some ten years before he achieved high regard. He was initially known for his direction of comedy hits starring either Chow Yun-fat or Stephen Chow, and dabbled in melodrama before moving on to action films; but it wasn't until the post-97 period that To came into his own as a director of excellence — an action auteur to be put on the same level as John Woo and Tsui Hark, and who has in fact surpassed both contemporaries in the post-97 Hong Kong cinema: Woo having settled in Hollywood making blockbusters that are not as highly regarded as his Hong Kong films, while Tsui's career has since run aground.

Periods of Adjustment

We shall now look at To's three periods of development in some depth in order to consider the historicist connections that I have hinted at above and to see more clearly To's accomplishments and status vis-à-vis his contemporaries in the Hong Kong cinema. The first very brief period only contained one film *The Enigmatic Case*, notable for being a film in the *wuxia* genre. The fact that To chose to make his debut in this particular genre placed him, incidentally, in the group of up and coming baby-boom generation directors at the time, namely Tsui Hark and Patrick Tam, who

chose to make their cinema debuts in the same genre. Both Tsui and Tam made an immediate critical impact with their respective films, *The Butterfly Murders*, released in 1979, and *The Sword*, released in 1981. Today, both films are regarded as modern classics of the genre that heralded the rise of the Hong Kong New Wave, while *The Enigmatic Case* is largely forgotten.

A comparison with Tsui's and Tam's films should make it evident why *The Enigmatic Case* was a failure. All three first-time directors had worked in television before moving on to feature films, but Tsui and Tam showed how accomplished they were as directors with an ability to direct actors and manage complicated action sequences in a cinematic fashion. *The Enigmatic Case* did not contain any remarkable action sequence, nor did it utilise special effects in the way that Tsui's and Tam's films did. Though To used a variety of techniques (such as an early use of the step-printed slow motion effect for the climactic fights), the film overall had an austere look and a fundamentally realistic style of martial arts choreography that made it altogether different from *The Butterfly Murders* and *The Sword*, which, in contrast, were spectacular visual productions with backing from major production houses. *The Enigmatic Case* was produced by a left-wing studio, which traditionally produced films based on ideological considerations, sometimes disguised under "artistic" imperatives. One of the first Hong Kong productions to be shot in China after the pronouncement of the "Open Door" policy in 1978, the storyline brought out a theme of corruption in high places which would have made it politically correct for distribution in the China market, while its other qualities of genre action would allow it to find an audience among overseas Chinese communities spread across the region. However, the film was a box-office failure, and if it is remembered at all, it is because of the fact that it is Johnnie To's first film.



Still 1.6 Cherie Chung tries to come between two swordfighters: a scene from the climactic step-printed slow-motion action sequence in *The Enigmatic Case*

The failure of *The Enigmatic Case* led To to exile himself in TV. He returned to work in TVB (Television Broadcasting Ltd.) where he had started. To worked on mini-series, many of which were adaptations of martial arts novels (such as *The Legend of the Condor Heroes* [1983] and *The Duke of Mount Deer* [1984]). He continued to work in television for most of the 80s, and returned to feature films in 1986 by joining the Cinema City company to make *The Happy Ghost 3*. His absence in the world of Hong Kong feature filmmaking from 1980 to 1986 meant that he did not contribute to the New Wave cinematic renaissance in the Hong Kong cinema. This was a period distinguished by such films as Ann Hui's *The Boat People* (1982), Allen Fong's *Father and Son* (1981) and *Ah Ying* (1982), Yim Ho's *Homecoming* (1984), Tsui Hark's *Dangerous Encounter — First Kind* (1980) and *Peking Opera Blues* (1986), Patrick Tam's *Nomad* (1982), and John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* (1986).

In the second period of his development, from 1986 to 1997, To worked steadily, achieving an early track record of hits in the genre of rollicking comedies, exemplified by the Chinese New Year movie *The Eighth Happiness*, starring Chow Yun-fat (1988) who gave a camp performance infused with a zaniness that rivals Stephen Chow's. To's critical stock remained mixed although he had by then established himself as a commercial filmmaker. His output in this period consisted of *All about Ah Long* (1989), *The Big Heat* (1988), *Casino Raiders II* (1991), *The Heroic Trio* (1993), *Executioners* (1993), and *Loving You* (1995), and the huge commercial successes of the Stephen Chow comedies *Justice My Foot* (1992) and *The Mad Monk* (1993). All were products of a hard-working craftsman, albeit one who had not yet apparently found his niche, oscillating between the comedy genre, melodrama, and the action genre. If To had made nothing else but these films, he might have been regarded as an interesting hack. These films offer an intermediate contrast with To's third and most distinguished period, from 1997 to the present, which is the period of focus in this monograph, and which have yielded his best films so far. In truth, To's career is one of contrast even now. He oscillates from the action picture to the kind of comedy genre or romance genre that marked his preceding periods. Thus *Fulltime Killer* (2001) and *Running out of Time 2* (2001) jostle for attention with Chinese New Year comedies like *Wu Yen* (2001) and *Fat Choi Spirit* (2002); a film like *Throw Down* (2004) is alternated with a romance-comedy like *Yesterday Once More* (2004). This suggests that To still feels compelled to adjust his talent to the needs of the industry even after he has achieved some of his most iconoclastic works. On the other hand, the diversity of To's works means that they are more difficult to pigeonhole. *Needing You* (2000), *Help!* (2000), *Running on Karma* (2003) and *Throw Down*

(2004) are fascinating works, combining tragedy and comedy, pathos and bathos, complicating but not necessarily obscuring the vision of To as an action auteur.

Johnnie Gets His Gun

My discussion above touched upon the possibility that To could have become a part of the New Wave if he had persisted in the film industry rather than returned to television. However, if we regard the New Wave not as an isolated burst of creative activity that took place within a brief period of time but as an extended process of cyclic developments, To's status could be reassessed. Having missed out on the first wave (Tsui Hark, Ann Hui, Allen Fong, Patrick Tam, Yim Ho, Kirk Wong, Alex Cheung) and seemingly the second wave (in which directors like Wong Kar-wai, Stanley Kwan, Clara Law, Eddie Fong gained critical acceptance), we can see To spearheading a third wave, including directors like Wai Ka-fai, Patrick Leung, Andrew Lau, Edmond Pang, and Fruit Chan. But perhaps the truth is that To is really an outsider who doesn't quite fit into the scheme of things. In this respect, his career path resembles that of John Woo's. Both directors worked their way up the rank and file and never went to film school: Woo within the studio system (Cathay and Shaw Brothers) and To in the TVB studio. Both directors were ultimately integrated into the ranks of pioneering stylists in the genre of their choice and became honorary members if not full members of the New Wave club (Woo arguably has remained the outsider by migrating to Hollywood where he seems now to be permanently settled).

Like Woo, To found that his *métier* laid in the gangster action genre, one that had a close affinity with the *wuxia* martial arts genre in which they also dabbled. To's films supplement Woo's notion of gangster chivalry and mateship — *The Mission*, arguably To's most distinctive work, echoes *The Killer* (1989) or *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) albeit with its own beat and style, and in a very real sense, the movie responds to and counteracts Woo's masterpieces. The trajectory from Woo's films to To's films imply an implicit association with each other and with a certain tradition. There is a historical inevitability in the paths of these two Hong Kong directors, though their careers progressed in different time periods. Woo entered the film industry in 1975, and To at the end of the 1970s. At this time, the Hong Kong cinema was preoccupied with kung fu movies following the Bruce Lee phenomenon, and martial arts action was *de rigueur* in other genres. Working in such an industry, both directors would naturally gravitate towards the action genres.

Their first films were martial arts pictures and they then digressed into comedy and melodrama, eventually reaching the field in which they now excel, namely the contemporary action film with gunplay.

Woo's and To's careers have followed a certain historical destiny which directs them inevitably to the action genre. Thus To follows the path of past directors such as Zhang Che, King Hu, Wang Tianlin (a retired director of many martial arts movies and the noir musical *Wild, Wild Rose* [1960] who was To's mentor during his television career and who has acted in minor roles in many of To's films, most notably as the senior triad uncle in *Election*) and contemporaneous directors: John Woo, Tsui Hark, Ringo Lam, Kirk Wong, Ann Hui, and Andrew Lau. To's contributions to the genre have exerted their own influences in the contemporary Hong Kong cinema: at least one critic has argued that the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy might not have been possible if To had not made his brand of action pictures.⁸³



Still 1.7 To's mentor, the avuncular Wang Tianlin (Wong Tin-lum, in Cantonese), as he appears in *Election*

While destiny might have guided Johnnie To to the forefront of Hong Kong cinema in the post-97 era, it cannot explain To's method, his style, his preoccupations, and the way his work and influence have shaped the development of the Hong Kong cinema. This is the task of this monograph. In truth, though To has earned critical accolades and awards, in terms of critical appraisal he is still under-appreciated. The reason for this may be ascribed to the perception of genre as low culture and the fact that To's career is highly uneven. That unevenness does not negate the need for analysis however, and it is possible to concentrate, as I aim to demonstrate, on one specific genre to determine the filmmaker's strengths as a whole. Unevenness is a mark of how representative a career like To's is, in the sense that To makes a wide range of genre films — another trait he shares with John Woo. Another reason is that To's career is still developing and critics are hesitant to draw any conclusions about the director's status. But by now it should be clear that

To is a major filmmaker, particularly following the exposure of *Election* and *Election 2* at the Cannes Film Festival. As the *Election* films demonstrate, To retains a capacity to surprise for better or worse, and while his reputation may rest on his handling of the genre of action films, his career is still developing and may not yet have reached its apex.

To's dedication to his craft also says something about the staying power of a film industry as its fortunes wax and wane. The work of Johnnie To demonstrates the inherent dynamism and creative energy of the industry as it appears to take its last gasps. To's importance lies in his ability to harness the industry to his largely independent ends. He has managed to gain auteur status without betraying his commercial instincts or working outside the mainstream, which is perhaps the root of his unevenness. There is an imperative to examine how To exercises his craft to shatter the expectations of the audience and the industry. Films like *The Mission*, *PTU*, *Breaking News* and *Throw Down* are relatively low key, low-budget examples of action movies compared with the average run of Hong Kong (and Hollywood) action blockbusters. To's films straddle the tradition of genre and that of art cinema and it is the purpose of this monograph to analyse the films in order to determine their specificities with regard to genre and to the auteurist qualities that render them extraordinary, distinguishing them from the average run-of-the-mill genre product of the Hong Kong cinema.

This monograph is a realization of what most people already know — that Johnnie To has produced a substantial body of work which more than justify a serious study. To deserves a book not only to discuss the artistry of his films but ultimately to recognise his contribution to the Hong Kong cinema. Monographs have been published on individual Hong Kong directors, including John Woo, Tsui Hark, and Wong Kar-wai,⁸⁴ but To's contribution to the Hong Kong cinema in the past six or seven years is arguably greater than any of these directors. To has made more attempts, and successful ones, to revitalise the industry while at the same time making personal films that are critically acclaimed. His survival throughout the lean years of the film industry's decline is not necessarily a consequence of his style or genre preoccupations but is more due to his proactive skills in re-energising and shoring up the film industry, making films in such a way that satisfied both his own aesthetic needs and the commercial needs of the industry. In the end, this monograph strives to fill a need to understand and appreciate the symbiotic dependence of an important director on genre. To has emerged as one of the most fascinating directors at the start of the new millennium precisely because he has found a niche in the genre cinema of one of the sturdiest film industries in the world.

The monograph shows that Johnnie To has mastered the action film genre to further his own ends of formal experimentation and to espouse a romantic fatalism relevant to the times. I systematically analyse his key works as discrete texts in a body of work, finding their meanings from the function of the auteur's intervention in the filmic texts and his re-writing of the codes and conventions. The monograph is composed of five chapters, a postscript and an epilogue, at the core of which is the textual analysis of To's action cinema. In this chapter, the introduction, I have laid out the theoretical formulations, explaining the intricate associations between genre and the director from the viewpoints of genre and auteur theory. I have also provided the background of To's early career in the Hong Kong cinema before he achieved critical prominence.

The analysis proper begins in Chapter 2 with an examination of the key films in To's career ranging from the period 1988 to 1997, *The Big Heat*, *The Heroic Trio*, *Executioners*, *Loving You* and *Lifeline*, which form a group of five films containing the blueprints for his later masterpieces analysed in Chapters 3 and 4. These chapters then address the two representative groups that formalize To's contributions to the genre as auteur. Chapter 3 deals with the Milkyway films, *Beyond Hypothermia*, *Too Many Ways to Be Number One*, *The Odd One Dies*, *The Longest Nite* and *Expect the Unexpected*, all of which carry To's name as producer, but as the chapter will make clear, To in fact directed many of the films. Chapter 4 deals with *A Hero Never Dies*, *Running out of Time*, *The Mission*, *PTU* and *Breaking News* which carry To's name as the solo director. All ten films feature the action stereotypes of cops and robbers, professional killers and gangsters, and there are outstanding action sequences characterized by gunplay. But they are also notable for their inventive dramatic situations, experimental and formalistic use of camera and film techniques, offbeat pacing and characterisations. All of these factors revise our expectations of the Hong Kong action cinema, and they are the result of the artistry which To exhibits and which allows us to recognize him as an auteur. Each of the films in the two core pentads in Chapters 3 and 4 will be discretely discussed to determine To's idiosyncratic handling of the genre.

In Chapter 5, I discuss *Needing You*, *Help!*, *Fulltime Killer*, *Running on Karma*, and *Throw Down*, another group of five films which constitutes an "uneven pentad" from the point of view of genre and To's direction. To's artistry is spread throughout the action genre and in other generic forms of the Hong Kong cinema. Any comprehensive study is obliged to include his films in other genres that both have and have no connections with the action form. The justification for this wider discussion is that To's status as an auteur must be judged against his prolific output. It is necessary to see how he has

developed and in what way his films connect and feed on each other. Hence, though the nucleus of this study is the gunplay action film with a concentration on the gangster film or the cops-and-robbers thrillers, we shall also consider To's contribution to the Hong Kong genre cinema *in toto* as much as possible. The concluding Chapters 6 summarizes this contribution to genre, examining To's achievements from the critical-theoretical perspective of genre expectations, in particular the convention of the happy ending.

The Postscript, inserted between Chapter 5 and the Epilogue, updates To's career to the release of *Exiled* (2006), and deals with his three most recent films: *Election*, *Election 2*, and *Exiled*. The two panels in the *Election* diptych stand apart from the rest of To's films because they contain new visions of violence and clear political implications in their narratives. To has put away his guns to devise ever more novel ways of articulating cinematic violence. They show To forever trying to top himself and dash the expectations of his public and the critics. Thus the films go a long way to defining his auteur status as a condition of tenacious autonomy. To may in fact live up to the words of Pierre Bourdieu, describing an artist as one "entirely the master of his product, who tends to reject not only the 'programmes' imposed a priori by scholars and scribes, but also ... the interpretations superimposed a posteriori on his work".⁸⁵ If he chooses to invoke it, To has this right as an auteur, an autonomous *film artist* beholden only to his work, and it is perhaps best to bear this in mind upfront as one pointer into his methodology and thinking (my interview with To, in the appendix, serves to demonstrate this). As for the "programme" and "interpretations" of this monograph, they are entirely the author's responsibility, constituting his own independence and autonomy⁸⁶ — the sum total of probing, understanding and appreciating a Hong Kong auteur of the contemporary era and the genre he works in.

Notes

Chapter 1

- 1 The spellings and uses of English first names in the Hong Kong cinema can be a very dicey matter for scholars who crave consistency. To's name was initially spelt "Johnny" in the English credit titles of his early films. As he became more successful and began to earn more recognition, the name was spelt "Johnnie". This tendency of changing the spellings of English names (and in some cases, changing whole names entirely) is an informal if also oft-used practice in the Hong Kong film industry: witness the changing of "Jacky" to "Jackie" in the case of Jackie Chan and Jackie Cheung as both became more recognised. Apart from speculating that the superstitious and *fengshui*-conscious Hong Kong Chinese have an aversion to the letter "y" and that the letters "ie" somehow resemble the number 8, signifying fortune, I can offer no other explanation as to why such a practice has come about in the cases mentioned. In other instances, it is the US market that determines spelling changes, for example, Stephen Chow, whose name I have in previous writings rendered as "Stephen Chiau" following the orthography of the credit titles in the star's early films, has since been changed to "Steven Chow" following his attempts to break into the US market with *Shaolin Soccer* and *Kung Fu Hustle*. For the purposes of this book, I have adopted "Stephen Chow" as my own form of compromise in the attempt to be consistent with previous usage. Based on the rationale of Chow's spelling-change for the US market, Johnnie To's name is sometimes rendered "Johnny To" in American writings, and if To at some point in the future decides to move to Hollywood, he may inevitably have to drop "Johnnie" for "Johnny".
- 2 See Barry Keith Grant, "Experience and meaning in genre films", in Grant (ed.), *Film Genre Reader II* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 114–128.
- 3 Ibid., p. 115.

- 4 On the subject of action as spectacle, see the editors' introductions in Jose Arroyo (ed.), *Action/Spectacle Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), and Yvonne Tasker (ed.), *Action and Adventure Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).
- 5 Bey Logan's *Hong Kong Action Cinema* (London: Titan, 1995) identifies action with the martial arts genre.
- 6 See Fran Mason, *American Gangster Cinema: From Little Caesar to Pulp Fiction* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2002); Thomas Leitch, *Crime Films* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Leitch views the gangster film and detective film as sub-genres of the crime film. In the same vein, the Hong Kong gangster film and the *policiers* can be seen as sub-genres of the crime film; or, as I am suggesting, both gangster and crime films are sub-genres of the "action film". Steve Neale groups three main genres within the classification of the crime film — the detective film, the gangster film and the suspense thriller; see Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 71–85.
- 7 James M. Welsh, "Action films: The serious, the ironic, the postmodern", in Wheeler Winston Dixon (ed.), *Film Genre 2000: New Critical Essays* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), p. 161.
- 8 Welsh, *ibid.*, p. 170.
- 9 Mark Gallagher, "I married Rambo: Spectacle and melodrama in the Hollywood action film", in Christopher Sharrett (ed.), *Mythologies of Violence in Postmodern Media* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999), p. 205.
- 10 See Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking and the Studio System* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1981), p. 27.
- 11 *Ibid.*, pp. 27, 29.
- 12 See Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 33.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 John Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique* (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1984), p. 13.
- 15 See Jacobs, "Gunfire", in Arroyo (ed.), *Action/Spectacle Cinema*, 9–16, p. 9.
- 16 Robert Warshaw, "Movie chronicle: The Westerner", *The Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theatre and Other Aspects of Popular Culture* (New York: Atheneum, 1972), p. 135. On technology and guns in the gangster film, see also Colin McArthur, *Underworld U.S.A.* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1972), pp. 30–32. Richard Slotkin coins the title "The Two-Gun Man of the Twenties" in one of his chapter sections in *Gunfighter Nation* to describe gangster films produced in the 1930s; see *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in the Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992), p. 260.
- 17 One crucial aesthetic influence is Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984), which can be seen as a logical extension of the mythic Western frontier as Leone has interpreted it in his series of Westerns. In a sense, *Once upon a*

- Time in America* reinterprets the Western for the contemporary age by reverting back to the East and its urban gangster milieu of New York.
- 18 Warshow, *ibid.*
 - 19 See Jason Jacobs, “Gunfire”, *ibid.*, p. 12.
 - 20 Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, pp. 401–402.
 - 21 Jason Jacobs, “Gunfire”, *ibid.*, p. 12.
 - 22 Richard Dyer, “Action!”, in Jose Arroyo (ed.), *Action/Spectacle Cinema*, 17–21, p. 18.
 - 23 Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 156.
 - 24 See Pang Laikwan, “Masculinity in crisis: Films of Milkyway Image and post-1997 Hong Kong cinema”, *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 2, no. 3 (November 2002), pp. 325–340.
 - 25 Jacobs, *ibid.*
 - 26 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
 - 27 *Ibid.*
 - 28 See Walter Benjamin, “Critique of violence”, in *Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), pp. 277–300.
 - 29 See Aaron Anderson, “Kinesthesia in martial arts films: Action in motion”, *Jump Cut*, no. 42 (1998): 1–11.
 - 30 See Anderson, *ibid.*, p. 1. Meaghan Morris observes that this model of “kung fu pedagogy” cinema goes through a “practice of mimesis — a specific art of imitation involving an ethical as well as bodily effort of learning to become-like the ideal embodied by the teacher”. See Meaghan Morris, “Transnational imagination in action cinema: Hong Kong and the making of a global popular culture”, in *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2004), 181–199, p. 186.
 - 31 See Nicole Brenez, “The secrets of movement: The influence of Hong Kong action cinema upon the contemporary French avant-garde”, in Meaghan Morris, Siu Leung Li and Stephen Chan Ching-kiu (eds.), *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), 163–173, p. 166.
 - 32 *Ibid.*, p. 169.
 - 33 *Ibid.*, pp. 169–170.
 - 34 Cawelti, *ibid.*, p. 13
 - 35 Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*, p. 70.
 - 36 See Tasker’s “Introduction” to Tasker (ed.), *Action and Adventure Cinema*, pp. 6–7.
 - 37 Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, p. 52.
 - 38 Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*, p. 65. Tasker associates “muscular cinema” with bodybuilding and the rise of stars such as Stallone and Schwarzenegger in the 1980s, but each previous decade has had its tradition of muscular cinema when we recall Western icons such as Johnny Weissmuller (30s), Victor Mature (40s), and Steve Reeves (50s and 60s), and Eastern ones such as Bruce Lee, who best

- symbolized muscular cinema in a Chinese context in the 1970s. The term “muscular cinema” may actually have a Chinese antecedence if we trace it to director Zhang Che’s coinage of *yang gang* (meaning masculine hardness) back in the late 1960s to describe a new kind of martial arts film in the Hong Kong action cinema featuring lithe muscular Chinese bodies (Zhang also applied the precept to non-martial arts films, as in the contemporary setting of the youth culture movie *Dead End* [1969] featuring Di Long, one of Zhang’s muscular icons).
- 39 *Spectacular Bodies*, p. 8.
- 40 See David Bordwell, “The art cinema as a mode of film practice”, in Leo Brady and Marshall Cohen (eds), *Film Theory and Criticism*, 6th edition (London and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 774–782.
- 41 See Peter Wollen, “The auteur theory”, in *Signs and Meanings in the Cinema* (Expanded Edition) (London: BFI, 1998), p. 71.
- 42 Bordwell, *ibid.*, p. 778.
- 43 See Tasker, *Action and Adventure Cinema*, p. 7.
- 44 On the concept of “body genre”, see Linda Williams, “Film bodies: Gender, genre and excess”, in Barry Keith Grant (ed.), *Film Genre Reader II* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), pp. 141–158. Williams identifies three “body genres” — the pornographic film, horror and melodrama. On the action movie as a “body genre”, see Linda Ruth Williams, “Ready for action: *G. I. Jane*, Demi Moore’s body and the female combat movie”, in Yvonne Tasker (ed.), *Action and Adventure Cinema*: 169–185, p. 170.
- 45 Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*, p. 4.
- 46 From a sociological viewpoint, fighting back is a duty for the man, as Pierre Bourdieu has shown in *Masculine Domination*: “*Manliness*, understood as sexual or social reproductive capacity, but also as the capacity to fight and to exercise violence (especially in acts of revenge), is first and foremost a *duty*”. See Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p. 51.
- 47 See Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), p. xii.
- 48 *Ibid.*
- 49 Kowloon Noir reflects To’s birth ties to Kowloon where he grew up (as a child To grew up within the Kowloon Walled City, an area originally under the control of the Qing government which gradually became a virtually independent crime-infested zone ruled mostly by the triads). To also maintains his office and studio in the industrial district of Kowloon Tong, which may explain why he chooses mainly to film his noirs on locations in Kowloon.
- 50 See Paul Schrader, “Notes on film noir”, in Barry Keith Grant (ed.), *Film Genre Reader II*, 213–225, p. 220.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p. 219.

- 52 Ibid., p. 220.
- 53 Gallagher, *ibid.*, p. 210.
- 54 See Tasker, “Introduction”, *Action and Adventure Cinema*, p. 4.
- 55 Peter Wollen, *ibid.*
- 56 See Stephen Neale, *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), p. 31.
- 57 For studies of genre undertaken from the perspectives of directors, see Colin McArthur, *Underworld U.S.A.*, and Jim Kitses, *Horizons West* (New Edition) (London: British Film Institute, 2004). See also Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres*.
- 58 Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?”, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, trans. by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 123.
- 59 *Ibid.*, p. 130.
- 60 Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang*, p. 416.
- 61 The most sustained study of Hong Kong film genres have been the past catalogues published by the Hong Kong International Film Festival on their retrospective programmes on Hong Kong cinema, concentrating on genres such as kung fu, swordplay (*wuxia*), melodrama, horror, opera film and comedy. Though the quality of the articles is very mixed, the catalogues contain invaluable historiographical and filmographical data. The publication has been discontinued since 2001 though the Hong Kong Film Archive has taken on much the same function with their publications. Book-length studies on Hong Kong genres have concentrated on the martial arts genre: see, for example, Bey Logan, *Hong Kong Action Cinema* (London: Titan, 1995), and Leon Hunt, *Kung Fu Cult Masters* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2003).
- 62 Neale, *Genre*, p. 10.
- 63 *Ibid.*, see pp. 9–10.
- 64 *Ibid.*, p. 41. Neale names directors such as Ophüls, Nicholas Ray, Murnau, Welles who attend to the skills to fill in “lack”.
- 65 See Neale, *ibid.*, p. 10 and p. 42.
- 66 See Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*, p. 6. Arroyo asserts that although it is popular, action/spectacle is the “most critically derided mode of filmmaking in Hollywood”. See Arroyo, *Action/Spectacle Cinema*, p. 1.
- 67 Neale, *ibid.*, p. 9.
- 68 Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 43.
- 69 Nicole Brenez, *ibid.*, p. 164.
- 70 To spoke briefly about his childhood in a news item “Du Qifeng jiuqi wenti toufang yihe weigui” (“Johnnie To: The question of 1997 projected on *Election 2*”), in *Ming Pao*, 6 April 2006. See also the excerpts of my conversation with Johnnie To in Appendix 2.
- 71 Meaghan Morris, “Transnational imagination in action cinema: Hong Kong and the making of a global popular culture”, in *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2004), 181–199, p. 195.

- 72 Ibid.
- 73 Ibid.
- 74 See Wollen, *ibid.*, p. 61.
- 75 Robert Warshow, *The Immediate Experience*, p. 27.
- 76 David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 2.
- 77 Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), p. 123.
- 78 Neale, *Genre*, p. 31.
- 79 Fredric Jameson, *ibid.*, p. 158.
- 80 Robin Wood, “Ideology, genre, auteur”, in Barry Keith Grant (ed.), *Film Genre Reader II*: 59–73, p. 63.
- 81 Ibid.
- 82 Ibid.
- 83 See Charles Leary, “What Goes Around, Comes Around: *Infernal Affairs II* and *III* and *Running on Karma*”, *Senses of Cinema*, Issue 3, January–February 2004, www.sensesofcinema.com.
- 84 See Kenneth E. Hall, *John Woo: The Films* (Jefferson, N.C. and London: McFarland and Co., 1999), Lisa Morton, *The Cinema of Tsui Hark* (Jefferson, N.C. and London: McFarland and Co., 2001), and Stephen Teo, *Wong Kar-wai* (London: British Film Institute, 2005).
- 85 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1984), p. 3.
- 86 Peter Wollen says that “an auteur film is constructed *a posteriori*” (*Signs and Meaning*, p. 71). Based on this insight, the interpretations superimposed on an auteur film are merely the auteur’s own work and it is the task of the critic to decrypt and decipher them.

Chapter 2

- 1 Mark Gallagher, “I Married Rambo: Spectacle and Melodrama in the Hollywood Action Film”, in Christopher Sharrett (ed.), *Mythologies of Violence in Postmodern Media*, p. 210.
- 2 To’s collaboration with Chow was not a happy experience for the director. Chow’s star power meant that he was constantly interfering in To’s direction, which proved so traumatic for To that he took one year off from directing after finishing *The Mad Monk*. He returned to directing with *Loving You* in 1995, a film that he was determined to make in his own style. See “Author’s Interview with Johnnie To”, Appendix 1.
- 3 To at this stage seems to have a thing for babies and birth-giving, a motif in *The Heroic Trio* that is also visible in *The Mad Monk* where Stephen Chow’s Dragon Fighter and his sidekick Tiger Fighter (played by Ng Mang-tat), two heavenly immortals sent to earth to do good deeds, are humorously reincarnated

through two pregnant women, quite randomly selected, who are at the point of giving birth.

- 4 See Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang*, p. 2.
- 5 Richard Dyer, “Action”, in Arroyo (ed.), *Action/Spectacle Cinema*, p. 18.
- 6 See “Author’s Interview with Johnnie To”, Appendix 1.
- 7 John Cawelti gives four modes of generic transformation: humorous burlesque, evocation of nostalgia, demythologization of generic myth, and the reaffirmation of myth as myth. See John Cawelti, “Chinatown and generic transformation in recent American films”, in Barry Keith Grant (ed.), *Film Genre Reader II*, 227–245, p. 243. It is difficult to say just what mode *The Big Heat* falls into though perhaps demythologization is more appropriate to the aim and manner of the Hong Kong filmmakers in remaking Lang’s classic.
- 8 Tom Gunning, *ibid.*
- 9 One other film that should be mentioned under this gore-slasher-horror category (and the reason why I have excluded it from this study) is *Intruder*, which To and Wai Ka-fai produced for Milkyway, directed by Tsang Kan-cheong, released in 1997. Wu Chien-lien plays a Mainland woman who murders a prostitute and assumes her identity to come to Hong Kong where she abducts a taxi driver, keeping him prisoner in his own home, finally to chop off his hands which are then transplanted onto her husband, a fugitive from the Mainland. The gross violence of the film led the Hong Kong censors to give it a Category III rating. The film is briefly discussed in Darrell Davis and Yeh Yueh-yu’s “Warning! Category III”, in *Film Quarterly*, vol. 54, no. 4, 2001, 12–26.
- 10 Lisa Morton, *The Cinema of Tsui Hark* (Jefferson, N.C., and London: McFarland and Co., 2001), p. 158.
- 11 The 1997 syndrome of anxiety engulfing Hong Kong society and the theme of corruption in high places can also be found in another Cinema City *policier*, *Blue Lightning* (1990), directed by Raymond Lee (but not produced by Tsui Hark). The detective hero (Tony Leung Ka-fai) investigates a woman’s murder with clues pointing to the involvement of a distinguished personage; he comments to a colleague, “Come 1997, we still wouldn’t solve the case!”
- 12 David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong*, p. 234.
- 13 *Ibid.* The device of the hero experiencing a sudden infirmity in his gunhand is a familiar one in the Western, genre, once again marking the affinity between To’s action films and the Western (both the American and Italian forms).
- 14 *Ibid.*, pp. 234–235.
- 15 Tom Gunning, *ibid.*, p. 425.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 420.
- 17 See Marc O’Day, “Beauty in motion: Gender, spectacle and action babe cinema”, in Yvonne Tasker (ed.), *Action and Adventure Cinema*, 201–218, p. 205. The cult influence of *The Heroic Trio* and *Executioners* on the West is demonstrated in the film version of *Charlie’s Angels* (2000), which Sheldon Lu says, “is to some extent a Hollywood version” of the two films. See Sheldon

- Lu, “*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, bouncing *Angels*: Hollywood, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and transnational cinema”, in Sheldon Lu and Emilie Yeh Yueh-yu (eds.), *Chinese-Language Film: Historiography, Poetics, Politics* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005), 220–233, p. 228.
- 18 The 1981 Australian camp classic *Turkey Shoot*, a sci-fi variation of *The Most Dangerous Game* aka *The Hounds of Zaroff* (1932), contains a scene in which a mutant creature tears off the little toe of a human prey and puts it into its mouth. To conceivably might have based this character on the creature in *Turkey Shoot*. In any case, it is an example of the global intertextuality that binds the Hong Kong cinema to Western generic counterparts. It should be noted also that the director of *Turkey Shoot*, Brian Trenchard-Smith, has a connection with the Hong Kong cinema, having helmed *The Man from Hong Kong* (1975), a Hong Kong-Australian co-production, starring Jimmy Wang Yu.
- 19 See Pang Laikwan, “Violence and new Asian cinema”, *Cultural Control and Globalization in Asia: Copyright, Piracy and Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 56.
- 20 See François Truffaut, *Hitchcock* (New York: Touchstone, 1985), p. 109. Truffaut uttered these words in the context of his interview with Hitchcock, while they were discussing the scene in *Sabotage* (1936), where a boy is killed in an explosion having unknowingly carried the bomb. Truffaut’s pronouncement was perhaps too strong and self-righteous, despite eliciting Hitchcock’s agreement on the matter. Interestingly, filmmakers have not been deterred from killing off children in cinema. A few years after the first edition of *Hitchcock* was published in 1967, Claude Chabrol, Truffaut’s contemporary and a Hitchcock admirer, showed a graphic killing of a young boy in *Que la Bête Meure* (1969), and horrific violence inflicted on a young child in *La Rupture* (1970). Then, in the early 1970s, came the Japanese “Lone Wolf and Cub” series in which a young child is witness to the violence inflicted by his father on scores of samurai. In the context of the Hong Kong action movie, *The Heroic Trio*’s use of babies may be described as somewhat “goofy and campy”, to quote from Manohla Dargis’s critique of the hospital scene in *Hard-Boiled* in comparison with the scene of the murder of the child which opens *Face/Off*. Dargis makes the point that the babies came across “not as victims but as willing co-conspirators in a spectacle that’s every bit as unreal as it is daft”. See Manohla Dargis, “Do you like John Woo?”, in Jose Arroyo (ed.), *Action/Spectacle Cinema*, 67–71, p. 71. “Unreal” and “daft” are operative words that could generically apply to *The Heroic Trio*, but to my mind, they only emphasize the ethical and mythic dimensions of violence.
- 21 Robert Warshaw, “Movie chronicle: The Westerner”, *The Immediate Experience*, p. 151.
- 22 Walter Benjamin, “Critique of violence”, in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, Peter Demetz (ed.) (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 277–300, p. 294.

- 23 On Niobe, see Benjamin, *ibid.*, pp. 294–295.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 294.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 295.
- 26 Anne T. Ciecko and Sheldon H. Lu, “*The Heroic Trio*: Anita Mui, Maggie Cheung, Michelle Yeoh — Self-reflexivity and the globalization of the Hong Kong action heroine,” *Post-Script*, vol. 19, no. 1, Fall 1999, p. 72.
- 27 For a reading on the crisis of masculinity in the Milkyway films, see Pang Laikwan, “Masculinity in crisis: Films of Milkyway Image and post-1997 Hong Kong cinema”, *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 2, no. 3 (November 2002), pp. 325–340.
- 28 Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 69.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- 31 Marc O’Day, *ibid.*, p. 216.
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 208.
- 34 See “Too many ways to be a filmmaker: Interview with Johnnie To”, *Hong Kong Panorama* 98–88, p. 65.
- 35 See Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), p. 1.
- 36 Ciecko and Lu, *ibid.*, p. 71.
- 37 See Stefan Hammond and Mike Wilkins, *Sex and Zen and A Bullet in the Head* (New York: Fireside, 1996), pp. 51–52; and Fredric Dannen and Barry Long, *Hong Kong Babylon* (New York: Hyperion, 1997), pp. 243–244, cited in Ciecko and Lu, *ibid.*, see p. 83, footnote 13.
- 38 Ciecko and Lu, *ibid.*, pp. 74–75.
- 39 See Lisa Odham Stokes and Michael Hoover, *City on Fire: Hong Kong Cinema* (London and New York: Verso, 2001), p. 133.
- 40 Ciecko and Lu, p. 75.
- 41 See “Author’s Interview with Johnnie To”, Appendix 1.
- 42 The character was based on a real-life cop named Chan Si-kei who was shot in the head during a gun battle with Mainland gangsters in Tai Kok Tsui in 1992. After a surgical operation that saved his life, Chan lost his sense of taste, and complications set in whereby brain fluid would leak out of his nose. He fought a long legal battle to demand compensation from the Hong Kong Police Force, and being constantly in the news, the local Chinese press dubbed him *wuwei shentan* (the tasteless detective).
- 43 Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*, p. 157.
- 44 *Ibid.*
- 45 *The One-Armed Swordsman* was influenced by the Japanese “Zatoichi” film series featuring a blind swordsman, and both heroic prototypes were cast together in a film *Zatoichi and the One-Armed Swordsman* (1971). To himself was obviously

- influenced by these prototypes when at the end of *Casino Raiders II* (1991), his gambling heroes Andy Lau and Wang Jie enter the final match physically handicapped, Lau is blind and Wang has only one arm (having cut off his other arm earlier). Blindness also features in *Throw Down*, and there the inspiration of the Zatoichi films forms a part of the overall Japanese influence of the work, being a film about judo and a tribute to Kurosawa.
- 46 In this respect, another Hollywood firefighting movie with which *Lifeline* also shares superficial similarities is *Ladder 49*, released in 2004; however, the depictions of group-bonding in *Ladder 49* are uncomfortably ridden with clichés and characterized by mawkish sentimentality.
- 47 See To’s comments in the “making of” documentary contained in the Hong Kong DVD edition of *Lifeline*, published by Mei Ah.

Chapter 3

- 1 See “Author’s Interview with Johnnie To”, Appendix 1.
- 2 The figure of the female assassin was popularized in the Hong Kong cinema in the 1990s, possibly influenced by John Huston’s *Prizzi’s Honor* (1985) where Kathleen Turner plays such a figure. Here, the female assassin is a reinterpretation of the hitman, as Fran Mason points out, with Turner’s portrayal betraying a “post-feminist modernity”. See Fran Mason, *American Gangster Cinema: From Little Caesar to Pulp Fiction*, p. 142. Wu Chien-lien’s female assassin is a post-feminist figure in the generic comic-book vein of the Hong Kong cinema (cf. the female assassins played by Chingmy Yau in Clarence Fok’s *The Naked Killer* [1992], and by Carman Lee in *The Odd One Dies*, discussed in this chapter).
- 3 *Beyond Hypothermia* ran for just one week in Hong Kong and grossed only HK\$2 million. See Ah Ngoi (A Dai), “Sheshi 32°, zhi zhi erbai wan” (“*Beyond Hypothermia*: Worth only 2 million?”), *Dianying Shuangzhou Kan* (*City Entertainment*), no. 459 (14–27 November 1996), p. 105.
- 4 Pierre Bourdieu informs us that a woman going on top is a negative inversion of the phallus, representing the world turned upside down, topsy-turvy. See Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, p. 18, and footnote on same page.
- 5 This is pretty self-evident in the film and not so much a case of allegorizing by the filmmakers so that it requires political interpretations from critics. Hence, Pang Laikwan’s contention that the China/Taiwan choice “carries no real meaning” smacks of denial. See Pang Laikwan, “Masculinity in crisis: Films of Milkyway Image and post-1997 Hong Kong cinema”, *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 2, no. 3 (November 2002), 325–340, p. 329. Pang skirts over this self-evident truth in order to make her real argument — that the film is really about a crisis of masculinity in the choice it offers Kau of “two (opposing) forms of masculinity”. The film “does not necessarily favour the takeover by one form of the other, as it does not legitimize the transition as a certain rite of passage

- for Ah Kau to attain manhood”. Pang makes the interesting point that the crisis of masculinity depicted in the film “is not socio-political but cinematic”. In other words, the crisis of masculinity is purely a cinematic crisis not related to “empirical reality but the ... existential question of who (Kau) is and the performativity of his gender identity” (see p. 331). I would argue that one does not cancel out the other — that the crisis of masculinity is both cinematic and socio-political. As Judith Butler states, a viable choice of gender identity depends on individual agency which is “bound up with social critique and social transformation”. See Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 7.
- 6 See interview with Johnnie To, “Too many ways to be a filmmaker”, *Hong Kong Panorama: 98–99*, 23rd Hong Kong International Film Festival (Hong Kong: Provisional Urban Council, 1999), p. 64.
 - 7 See “Author’s Interview with Johnnie To”, Appendix 1.
 - 8 Wai’s 2005 Chinese New Year comedy *Himalaya Singh* comes close to the zestful anarchic manner of *Too Many Ways*, but the film is just anarchic in a boisterous, disastrous sort of way with little to show by way of substance, which tends to prove that To’s creative role in the partnership is much greater than we would think, and certainly more crucial to Wai than the other way around.
 - 9 See Gary, “Wang Jiawei de yizhang yingbi” (“Wong Kar-wai and a coin”), *Dianying Shuangzhou Kan (City Entertainment)*, no. 427 (24 August–6 September 1995), p. 33.
 - 10 Lau Ching-wan reveals that Wai used 9.8 mm lens to shoot the film. See Lawrence Pun (ed.), *Milkyway Image, Beyond Imagination* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 2006), p. 32.
 - 11 See Cheung Kwok-cheung (Zhang Guoxiang), “Huanxiang fang’an: yingxiang pincou shiyan, liangge zhineng huo yige” (“Fantasy file: Image and experiment in *The Odd One Dies*”) in *Dianying Shuangzhou Kan (City Entertainment)*, no. 465 (3–19 February 1997).
 - 12 See “Author’s Interview with Johnnie To”, Appendix 1.
 - 13 I have borrowed the term “musculinity” from Yvonne Tasker, a play on muscular and masculinity referring to those qualities associated with masculinity being “written over” the female body in action films. “‘Musculinity’ indicates the way in which the signifiers of strength are not limited to male characters”. See Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*, p. 149.
 - 14 See interview with Yau, “*Expect the Unexpected* — Japanese soap in Patrick Yau’s action thrillers”, *Hong Kong Panorama: 98–99*, p. 81.
 - 15 To, however, was always forthright in claiming authorship in public forums, interviews and in the Extra Features on the Hong Kong-published DVD editions of *The Longest Nite* and *Expect the Unexpected*. As the credited director of these two films, Patrick Yau is barely acknowledged in the “Making of” or “Star interviews” features. It is always To who answers the questions and explains the themes and motivations of the films — a clear sign of To’s authority which he probably also exerted on the set.

- 16 See interview with Wai Ka-fai, “Common passions, Wai Ka-fai on Johnnie To”, *Hong Kong Panorama*: 98–99, p. 68.
- 17 See Leo Braudy, *The World in a Frame: What We See in Films* (New York: Anchor Press, 1977), p. 227.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 See To’s interview in the special features of the DVD of *PTU*.
- 20 The introductory prologue explaining the gang wars was not included in the original version previewed in Hong Kong over the Christmas period in 1997. Other scenes from the original version were also missing in the version that was released on New Year’s Day, 1998. For an account of the two different versions, see Ah Ngoi (A Dai), “You xingfen dao kaifen — xinjiu banben de ‘anhua’” (“From excitement to anger: Two versions of *The Longest Nite*”), *Dianying Shuangzhou Kan (City Entertainment)*, no. 489 (8–21 January 1998), pp. 70–71. My analysis of the film is based on the DVD version published by Universe Laser and Video Company, Hong Kong. This DVD version contains those scenes that were described in Ah Ngoi’s article as cut out from the original preview version, but it retains the introductory prologue of the release version. As it stands, this prologue sequence appears as if it had been hastily shot and added into the film because the preview audience had found the plot confusing (the original version opened with a shot of one of the protagonists shaving his head, which, if it was put back into the DVD version, would have the function of telegraphing the double theme).
- 21 Mirrors, as well as shadows, are long-established devices in literature to suggest the double, as Otto Rank has shown in his pioneering study of the double, inspired by the silent classic *The Student of Prague* (1926). The cinema constituted a “modern treatment” of an ancient theme and was unique in its ability to “visibly portray psychological events”, with “exaggerated clarity”. See Otto Rank, *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study*, trans. Harry Tucker, Jr. (London: Karnac, 1989), p. 4, p. 7. See also Ralph Tymms, *Doubles in Literary Psychology* (Cambridge: Bowes and Bowes, 1949).
- 22 Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*, p. 158. Freud drew on the work of Rank, who demonstrates the close connection between narcissism (the double motif cast by reflection and on occasion, shadow or twin) and the fear of death in *The Double*. See in particular his last chapter “Narcissism and the Double”.
- 23 Tasker, *ibid.*
- 24 Otto Rank, *The Double*, p. 16.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- 27 Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), p. 160, p. 162.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 144.
- 29 See “Making Of” in the DVD extras of *The Longest Nite* (Universe Laser and Video Co., Hong Kong).

- 30 The geography of this key location and of the action that takes place in later scenes is revealed in the dialogue, although To may not necessarily have shot on these actual locations.
- 31 See interview with Johnnie To in the “Star Interviews” extras of the DVD of *Expect the Unexpected*, published by Universe Laser and Video Company, Hong Kong.
- 32 To addressed the criticism of negativity in the “Special Features” section of the DVD of the film.
- 33 See “Author’s Interview with Johnnie To”, Appendix 1.
- 34 See “*Expect the Unexpected* — Japanese soap in Patrick Yau’s action thrillers” *Hong Kong Panorama*: 98–99, p. 81.
- 35 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 188.
- 36 See Bun Nei (Bin Ni), “Feichang turan: yushui de siwang yishi” (“*Expect the Unexpected*: Rain and its death consciousness”), *Dianying Shuangzhou Kan (City Entertainment)*, no. 499 (23 May–11 June 1998), p. 47.
- 37 Interview with Johnnie To, DVD of *Expect the Unexpected*.

Chapter 4

- 1 To stated in an interview that *A Hero Never Dies* was conceived in 1997 but the shooting was put off until 1998 because of scheduling problems with the actors. See Cinnie, “Du Qifeng: wei dianying er anzhan” (“Johnnie To: Struggling in the dark for cinema”), *Dianying Shuangzhou Kan (City Entertainment)*, no. 508 (1–15 October 1998), p. 38. See also “Common passions, Wai Ka-fai on Johnnie To”, *Hong Kong Panorama 98–99* (Hong Kong: Provisional Urban Council, 1999), p. 68.
- 2 See “Beyond *Running out of Time* and *The Mission*: Johnnie To ponders one hundred years of film”, *Hong Kong Panorama 1999–2000* (Hong Kong: Leisure and Cultural Services Department, 2000), p. 46.
- 3 See “Author’s Interview with Johnnie To”, Appendix 1.
- 4 Fredric Jameson, “Magical narratives: Romance as genre”, *New Literary History*, vol. 7, no. 1, Autumn 1975, p. 141.
- 5 See Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 144.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 159.
- 7 Jameson, *ibid.*, p. 153.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 141.
- 9 Robert Warshow, “The gangster as tragic hero”, *The Immediate Experience*, p. 129.
- 10 Warshow, “Movie chronicle: The Westerner”, *The Immediate Experience*, p. 151.

- 11 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. by Annette Lavers (New York: Noonday Press, 1993), p. 88.
- 12 *Running out of Time* marks the first occasion that To worked with foreign writers, a conscious decision on To's part to try to make his films more international, although in fact To found the work of the two Frenchmen to be incompatible with his vision and he had to ask Yau Nai-hoi to rewrite the script. See "Beyond *Running out of Time* and *The Mission*: Johnnie To ponders one hundred years of film", *Hong Kong Panorama 1999–2000*, p. 49; and "Author's Interview with Johnnie To", Appendix 1.
- 13 Jameson, *ibid.*, p. 153.
- 14 See "Author's Interview with Johnnie To", Appendix 1.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Ken's character is most likely inspired by the phenomenon of real-life policemen being heavily indebted to loan sharks in the post-97 depression — the subject of Herman Yau's *Shark Busters* (2002).
- 17 Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, p. 567.
- 18 See Johnnie To, "Qianghuo: Shot by shot" ("*The Mission*: Shot by shot"), *Dianying Shuangzhou Kan (City Entertainment)*, no. 537 (11–24 November 1999), p. 48. See also "Beyond *Running out of Time* and *The Mission*: Johnnie To ponders one hundred years of film", p. 48.
- 19 See "Beyond *Running out of Time* and *The Mission*: Johnnie To ponders one hundred years of film", p. 48. It is in this instant of stillness that we might grasp the meaning of Nicole Brenez's prognosis on movement: "cinema ... can never really show Martial Art, because it is a spiritual movement. But on the other hand, cinema can always develop many and more ways to describe the non-figurative phenomenon of psychic energy". See Nicole Brenez, "The secrets of movement: The influence of Hong Kong action cinema upon the contemporary French avant-garde", in Morris, et al (ed.), *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema*, p. 169.
- 20 To himself describes the music as a "lively Cha-Cha beat, which hopefully would lead the audience to look at the five bodyguards as if they were puppets on a string, dancing to the orders of the godfather, with no control over their destinies". See Johnnie To, "Ruhe yong jingzhi jingtou buzhuo qiangzhan donggan: Qianghuo zhizuo shouji" ("How to use static shots to capture the sense of motion in gunfights: Production notes of *The Mission*"), *Dianying Shuangzhou Kan (City Entertainment)*, no. 537 (11–24 November 1999), p. 47.
- 21 Jameson, *ibid.*, p. 142.
- 22 Johnnie To, "Ruhe yong jingzhi jingtou buzhuo qiangzhan donggan: Qianghuo zhizuo shouji" ("How to use static shots to capture the sense of motion in gunfights: production notes of *The Mission*"), p. 46.
- 23 Here, I assert that Thomas Schatz's notion of "determinate space" (in which the gangster genre exists) as a space of sustained conflict "violently enacted

- ... according to a prescribed system of rules and behavioural codes” can be transmogrified into an indeterminate space through the formal, abstract elements arising from the characters’ conduct of action. In the indeterminate space, the principal characters struggle “to bring their own views in line ... with one another’s”. See Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres*, pp. 27, 29.
- 24 See Wright, *Sixguns and Society*, p. 86.
- 25 See Pang Laikwan, “Masculinity in crisis: Films of Milkyway Image and post-1997 Hong Kong cinema”, *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 2, no. 3 (November 2002), 325–340, p. 335.
- 26 Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, p. 51.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- 28 See Forrest, “Qianghuo” (“*The Mission*”), *Dianying Shuangzhou Kan (City Entertainment)*, no. 539 (9–22 December 1999), p. 91.
- 29 Johnnie To, “Qianghuo: Shot by Shot” (“*The Mission: Shot by shot*”), p. 48.
- 30 See Gilles Deleuze, *The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 136.
- 31 Patrick Tam criticizes the sequence for its “inaccuracy of the editing”, emphasizing that the timing is off, pointing as an example to those shots of the nightwatchman launching the attack on the group as they go down the elevator while he is on the other side going up the elevator. Tam does not accept the application of cinematic time in this sequence, since To eschews the use of slow-motion. Tam differentiates cinematic time from narrative time (or diegetic time) and considers that the whole sequence is driven realistically by narrative diegetic time, demanding a need for accurate editing. Conversation with Patrick Tam, 21 March 2005, Hong Kong. My argument is that space and time are already distorted as the bodyguards stand still on the elevator, and when the action erupts, all the protagonists move into their “inner worlds” of action.
- 32 See Cecilia Wong, “Du Qifeng: Jiuqing wo zui xiang jiang mie” (“Johnnie To: What do I want to say, exactly?”), *Dianying Shuangzhou Kan (City Entertainment)*, no. 626 (10–23 April 2003), p. 49.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- 34 Though the plot broadly recalls Lu Chuan’s Mainland production *Missing Gun* (2002), the film has since brought up associations with a real-life incident that occurred in Tsimshatsui on 17 March 2006 in which an off-duty policeman named Tsui Po-ko had apparently shot two policemen on patrol, killing one of them and seriously injuring the other. It was said that Tsui, who was killed in the incident, had planned to rob his colleagues of their guns and bullets. It was later revealed that the gun he used was reported missing and had belonged to a policeman who was shot dead in March 2001; the same gun was then used in December that year in a robbery that resulted in the death of a security guard. Tsui was probably responsible for both incidents. This truth-is-stranger-than-

- fiction parallel with To's gangster and police dramas invests a sense of uncanny doubling between cinema and real life that has marked To's works, particularly evident in *Loving You*, *Lifeline*, and *The Longest Nite*.
- 35 To jokingly says that if there was a single location where he would have wanted to stage a gunfight battle, it was Cameron Road, but he could not get permission from the police to do it. See Cecilia Wong, *ibid.*, p. 51. To revealed in a conversation with me that the Canton Road shootout sequence was actually shot not in Canton Road but in Ap Lei Chau on the south side of Hong Kong Island.
- 36 See Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 80.
- 37 Warshow, "The gangster as tragic hero", *The Immediate Experience*, p. 131.
- 38 Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, p. 234.
- 39 Johnnie To, "Director's interview" in *Special Features* of the *PTU* DVD, published by Media Asia, Hong Kong.
- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 See "Johnnie To: What do I want to say exactly?", *City Entertainment*, p. 50.
- 42 To shot a prologue scene, deleted in the Hong Kong version (but apparently included in the Mainland version, on the request of the Chinese censors), showing the Mainland robbers meeting in a café to plan their robbery in Hong Kong, their meeting being secretly photographed by Chinese detectives who also lip-read their conversations. This information is then passed on to the Hong Kong CID which leads to the scene which now opens the film. This deleted scene is included in the DVD edition of *Breaking News*, published by Media Asia, Hong Kong. The Mainland version, which I have not seen, would thus have interrupted the rhythm of the opening, breaking the impact of the long take sequence.
- 43 See "Author's Interview with Johnnie To", Appendix 1. The scene was shot on Chun Wing Street, Tai Kok Tsui, where the shop buildings had been earmarked by the government for redevelopment and were fully vacated, which suited To's purposes to use the entire street as a set. See also *Hong Kong on Location*, newsletter of the Hong Kong Film Services Office, issue no. 12, p. 4, available online at <http://www.fso-tela.gov.hk/newsletter.cfm>.
- 44 See "Author's Interview with Johnnie To", Appendix 1. Interestingly, Patrick Tam criticizes the sequence for its absences (action that is still going on which we do not see). Tam emphasizes that the idea of a long sustained take is to "show it all" and that To's focusing on certain aspects of presence while letting other aspects go absent negates the integrity of the long take. The sequence should therefore be edited, according to Tam (conversation with Patrick Tam, 21 March 2005, Hong Kong).
- 45 "Author's Interview with Johnnie To", Appendix 1.
- 46 The geography in *Breaking News* is much more sequential and logical than in *PTU*, and I take this to be a sign of To's more objective assessment of the

characters who aren't as touched by inner panic and fear as are the characters in *PTU*.

47 Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres*, p. 41.

Chapter 5

- 1 See Tzvetan Todorov, "The methodological heritage of formalism", *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 248–251.
- 2 Roland Barthes, "The world of wrestling", *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), p. 24.
- 3 Fredric Jameson, "Magical narratives: Romance as genre", p. 135.
- 4 Stephen Neale, *Genre*, p. 19.
- 5 To's overcoming of constraints takes place against the background of postmodern millenarianism, with its cry of the End of Time and the End of History, which has a particular resonance in Hong Kong in the last decade of the 20th century: some of the finer cinematic examples of this trend in Hong Kong and the global cinema are Wong Kar-wai's *Ashes of Time* (1994) and *Happy Together* (1997), Tsui Hark's *The Blade* (1995), Fruit Chan's *The Longest Summer* (1998), Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1995), P. T. Anderson's *Magnolia* (1999), and Emir Kusturica's *Underground* (1995).
- 6 See Terry Eagleton, "Capitalism, modernism and postmodernism", *New Left Review*, no. 152 (1985), pp. 68–69.
- 7 Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Cleveland and London: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1973), p. 23.
- 8 Eagleton, *ibid.*, p. 68.
- 9 The story was adapted by Wai Ka-fai and Yau Nai-hoi from a radio play which To had happened to hear on the radio. See Ernie Au "Du Qifeng: gunan guanü xin qishi" ("Johnnie To: The new inspiration of *Needing You*"), *Dianying Shuangzhou Kan (City Entertainment)*, no. 553 (22 June–5 July 2000), p. 41.
- 10 See Jonathan Clements and Motoko Tamamuro, *The Dorama Encyclopedia: A Guide to Japanese TV Drama Since 1953* (Berkeley, California: Stone Bridge Press, 2003), pp. 219–220.
- 11 See Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls*, p. 6.
- 12 Noël Carroll, "Notes on the sight gag", *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 146.
- 13 See Carroll, *ibid.*, p. 150 and p. 153.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 146.
- 15 See Braudy, *The World in a Frame*, p. 114.
- 16 To spoke of *Fulltime Killer* as a "mid-way station" towards making films fully spoken in English. The rationale was to broaden the market for Hong Kong

- films, particularly in the traditional Southeast Asian market, because relying on the Hong Kong domestic market alone would not bring about a “big resurgence” of the Hong Kong cinema and reverse its present decline. See Cheung Kwok-man (Zhang Guowen), “Du Qifeng: maixiang Yazhou hua diyi bu” (“Johnnie To: The first step towards Asianization”), *Dianying Shuangzhou Kan (City Entertainment)*, no. 581 (19 July–1 August 2001), p. 37.
- 17 Ien Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living between Asia and the West* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 36.
 - 18 *Ibid.*, p. 35.
 - 19 Examples of Cantonese films set in the Southeast Asian diaspora are *Song of Malaya* (1954), *Love in Penang* (1954), *Moon under the Palm Grove* (1957), *Blood Stains the Valley of Love* (1957), *She Married an Overseas Chinese* (1957), *Kuala Lumpur Nights* (1958), *Grass by the Lake* (1959), *Merdeka Bridge* (1959), *Bride from Another Town* (1959), *The Fragrance of Durians* (1959), *The Curse* (1965), *Love with a Malaysian Girl* (1969). Hong Kong’s Mandarin cinema also produced numerous features about the Diaspora, including *Nyonya* (1952), *Baba and Nyonya* (1956), *Rendezvous in the South Sea* (1960), *The Lovers and the Python* (1961), *The Girl from Phnom Penh* (1963). Perhaps the most famous of all the Southeast Asian-set features is Bruce Lee’s *The Big Boss* (1971), which is set in Thailand and dubbed into Mandarin and Cantonese versions. For a filmography of Hong Kong films dealing with the Diaspora at large, see the 16th Hong Kong International Film Festival catalogue *Overseas Chinese Figures in Cinema* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1992), pp. 124–127 (in Chinese only). The majority of these films were set in pre-independence Malaysia, showing effectively a strong Chinese immigrant flow between Hong Kong and the British-administered territories of Malaya, the Straits Settlements (including Singapore and Penang), Sarawak and North Borneo, before all these territories were incorporated into the Federation of Malaysia in 1963 (North Borneo was renamed Sabah after joining Malaysia).
 - 20 Ien Ang, *ibid.*, p. 36.
 - 21 See interview with Andy Lau, *Dianying Shuangzhou Kan (City Entertainment)*, no. 581 (19 July–1 August 2001), p. 40.
 - 22 Intimations here of Ford’s *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), where the phrase “print the legend” comes from.
 - 23 As with the motif of illnesses which render a hero’s gunhand useless in crucial moments, the Western genre is a rich source for such motifs. Edward Dmytryk’s *Western Warlock* (1959) contains a scene of the hero Richard Widmark being pinned down by the villain sticking a knife in his hand. It is not clear whether To has seen *Warlock*, a film largely neglected but which has developed a cult reputation and is one of the classical Western influences on Leone’s *Once upon a Time in the West* (1969).
 - 24 See “Johnnie To: The first step towards Asianization”, *Dianying Shuangzhou Kan (City Entertainment)*, no. 581, p. 37.

- 25 See Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 109. Mark Gallagher makes almost the same point in his thesis of the action film as a genre which fetishizes the male body: “Action films, through their overemphasis on the terrain of action, suggest the crisis of masculinity that lurks beyond the edges of spectacle-oriented narratives.” See Gallagher, “I married Rambo: Spectacle and melodrama in the Hollywood action film”, p. 209.
- 26 The quotes are taken from “Interview with Yvonne Tasker”, *The Velvet Light Trap*, no. 49 (Spring 2002), pp. 45–46.
- 27 See Mary Ann Doane, “The voice in the cinema: The articulation of body and space”, in Philip Rosen (ed.), *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 335.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 336. Doane asserts that the spectator is aware of the gap between body and voice, and to this extent, the phantasmatic body is an indicator of the spectator as the “invisible subject” whose natural inclination is to fill in the gap, hence the function of unity which Doane attributes to the phantasmatic body. However, in the case of *Running on Karma*, the spectator would be aware that there is a gulf between what is seen of Andy Lau’s body in the film and what is generally known of Andy Lau in real life as a slim and slender male star. For example, the film plays on the enticing possibility of seeing Andy Lau in the nude but the artificial body keeps his natural body from us, though we do catch a brief glimpse of him nude at the end, shed of his body suit.
- 29 The role could have been played either by Ruby Wong or Maggie Siu, both members of To’s repertory of actors, who appeared in *PTU*, for example. Though they were more suitable for the role, both actors did not have the star power of Cecilia Cheung, and for this reason, To did not see fit to give either Wong or Siu the breaks they deserved by casting either one in the role opposite Andy Lau. Cheung was also cast because she had worked with Andy Lau for the first time in the Chinese New Year comedy *Cat and Mouse* (2003) prior to *Running on Karma*, and both stars were felt to have good chemistry.
- 30 Wai Ka-fai, in “Making Of” extra feature on DVD of *Running on Karma*, published by Mei Ah, Hong Kong.
- 31 Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 148.
- 32 See interview with To in the extras of the DVD edition of *Throw Down*, published by Panorama, Hong Kong. See also “Author’s Interview with Johnnie To”, Appendix 1.
- 33 These films include John Sturges’s *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), Martin Ritt’s *The Outrage* (1964), Sergio Leone’s *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), George Lucas’s *Star Wars* (1977), Jimmy Murakami’s *Battle beyond the Stars* (1980), George Miller’s *Max Max beyond Thunderdome* (1985), Sammo Hung’s *The Moon Warriors* (1993), Walter Hill’s *Last Man Standing* (1996), and many other films that are influenced by Kurosawa’s films or scenes from his films or by Kurosawa’s various techniques.

- 34 Interview with To, DVD of *Throw Down*.
- 35 See Jimmy Ngai (Wei Shaoen), “Roudao longhu bang de gancao lüye” (“Character actors and fresh faces in *Throw Down*”), <http://ent.sina.com.cn> (30 August 2004).
- 36 These scenes set in the video game parlor are meant as a counterpoint to similar scenes in *PTU* showing petty gangsters being humiliated by Simon Yam’s cop. To says he was attracted to video game parlors because “the players are completely focused on what they are doing, oblivious to their surroundings or the people next to them” (see “Author’s Interview with Johnnie To”, Appendix 1), which illustrates the subjectivity of To’s characters, the idea that they are totally absorbed in their inner worlds. This is partly induced by their professions, thus the bodyguards in *The Mission* are totally concentrated on the job, and in this manner, Szeto is therefore a typical To character, while Brother Savage is atypical, being highly eccentric to the point of pathology, who nevertheless complements Szeto in his interiority, symbolized by the setting of the video game parlor.
- 37 Interview with To, DVD of *Throw Down*.
- 38 Roland Barthes, “The World of Wrestling”, *Mythologies*, p. 16.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Interview with To, DVD of *Throw Down*.

Chapter 6

- 1 Conversation with Johnnie To in Melbourne, Australia, 6 August 2005.
- 2 A term borrowed from Marc O’Day, see O’Day, “Beauty in motion: Gender, spectacle and action babe cinema”, in *Action and Adventure Cinema*, p. 208.
- 3 See Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, in particular the section on symbolic violence, pp. 33–42.
- 4 Bourdieu, *ibid.*, p. 41.
- 5 On Kurosawa’s influence on Peckinpah, see Stephen Prince, “Genre and violence in the work of Kurosawa and Peckinpah”, in Yvonne Tasker (ed.), *Action and Adventure Cinema*, 331–344, pp. 339–340. To was influenced equally by Peckinpah as he was by Kurosawa in devising the violence of *Election* and *Election 2* in the sense of “their attitude to violence” as Prince writes, “that gave them (Kurosawa and Peckinpah) the power and skill to show it in horrific and haunting ways” (p. 342).
- 6 See Walter Benjamin, “Critique of violence”, in *Reflections*, 277–300, p. 287.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 286.
- 8 For a reading of the localism of *Election*, see Shu Kei, “*Election*: A film that refuses to compromise”, in Lawrence Pun (ed.), *Milkyway Image, Beyond Imagination*, 318–326.
- 9 To’s quoted remarks were uttered in a Commercial Radio interview heard by the author in Hong Kong, broadcast on 18 April 2006 about a week before

- the release of *Election 2*. See also To's interview with Lawrence Pun in Pun (ed.), *Milkyway Image, Beyond Imagination*, 306–314, p. 312.
- 10 See Peter Ip Pau-fuk, "Organized crime in Hong Kong", paper delivered in a seminar *Organized Crime and the 21st Century* at the Hong Kong University on 26 June 1999. See <http://www.crime.hku.hk/organizecrime.htm>.
 - 11 Sek Kei (Shi Qi), "Hei shehui de xuanju wenti" ("The problem of election in *Election*"), *Ming Pao*, 8 May 2006.
 - 12 Ibid.
 - 13 See Frank Viviano, "Hong Kong Triads' new frontier", *San Francisco Chronicle*, 28 May 1997.
 - 14 Sek Kei, *ibid.*
 - 15 See Benjamin, *ibid.*, p. 295.
 - 16 See Lawrence Pun, *ibid.*, p. 314.
 - 17 See Pang Laikwan, *Cultural Control and Globalization in Asia: Copyright, Piracy and Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 56.
 - 18 See Meaghan Morris, "Transnational imagination in action cinema: Hong Kong and the making of a global popular culture", in *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2004), 181–199, p. 186.
 - 19 Ibid.
 - 20 Louis Koo himself refers to Jimmy as the "coolest, with the highest IQ and the highest EQ" of the characters in the *Wo Sing*. See interview with Louis Koo in *Dianying shuangzhou kan (City Entertainment)*, no. 705 (20 April–3 May 2006), p. 33.
 - 21 On the other hand, it also demonstrates the prevalence of *yang* violence, so much so that it infuses female action figures so that they are regarded as ambiguous — the notion that "the action heroine is 'really a man'", which is a point that Tasker makes, with her formulation of "musculinity". See Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*, p. 132.
 - 22 Pang Laikwan, "Masculinity in crisis: Films of Milkyway Image and post-1997 Hong Kong cinema", *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 2, no. 3 (November 2002), 325–340, p. 337.
 - 23 Ibid., p. 326.
 - 24 Ibid., p. 334.
 - 25 The hell-on-earth motif in recent Hong Kong gangster films was given its most prominent treatment in the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy (2002–03). The trilogy's Chinese title *Wujian dao* refers to the Buddhist Avici hell where suffering is at its most prolonged suggesting that Hong Kong is the Avici hell of the title — another allegorical sign of the times demonstrating the connection between the genre and Hong Kong's economic depression and political dejection in the post-97 era.
 - 26 One of the archaic rituals performed during the investiture ceremony of Lok in *Election* was the priest smacking the inductees with a sword from behind, asking the question "Do you love gold or your brethren?" to which the

- inductees reply “My brethren!” Presumably, if someone had answered “Gold!”, his head would have been cut off.
- 27 Sek Kei suspects there may be a third edition because, in his view, *Election 2* “has not in fact ended”. He writes, “The Public Security Bureau exerts pressure on Louis Koo forcing him to make the Wo Sing Society a family enterprise and to end the system of elections, but how will this be achieved? If Koo were to scrap elections, difficulties would surely arise and there would be more slaughter.” See Sek Kei, “Yihe weigui gong’an tuchu” (“The Public Security Bureau stands out in *Election 2*”), *Ming Pao*, 9 May 2006.
- 28 Sek Kei, “The Public Security Bureau stands out in *Election 2*”.
- 29 Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, p. 40.
- 30 The press notes provided by Media Asia state that the film is set in 1998, which I can only assume is a mistake since it is clear from the plot that the action takes place over the three days before the handover on December 20 1999: the final shootout culminates just as the handover comes into effect.
- 31 The Macau setting is apposite to To’s inscription of a running commentary on the politics of the triad-police collusion in Macau and Hong Kong and the corruption of the Macau police force, which is the subject of *The Longest Nite*. To had originally toyed with the idea of shooting the film in Cuba and then in Buenos Aires but eventually gave up on these locations for budgetary reasons (I thank Shan Ding for this information). Macau was therefore chosen because it was the cheapest place to shoot in, but though it allowed To to retain the concept of shooting the film in a “Latin” setting, Macau’s reputation as a coven of triad activities and the prevalence of gang wars during the years before the handover completely fits To’s purposes and probably bring out his function as a political commentator more appropriately than shooting the film in Cuba would.
- 32 Here, I am invoking the concept of the fetishistic look as the spectacle of male bodies, described in Steve Neale’s article “Masculinity as spectacle” — a spectacle accentuated by To through the use of slow motion. See *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 285.
- 33 According to the Hong Kong censors, the handshake was done in the fashion of a triad ritual. The Mandarin-dubbed version which I saw in Singapore carries this scene intact.
- 34 The security guard, Sergeant Chen, played by Richie Jen, is a temporary member of the group but he is, fundamentally, an outsider who, like Hui Shiu-hung’s inspector, is a law enforcer. Significantly, these outsiders survive because they cannot enter the subjective inner worlds of the protagonists. The women, on the other hand, do enter the inner world and the threat they represent to this masculine world is therefore more palpable.
- 35 Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 27.
- 36 See Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang*, p. 428.

- 37 Walter Benjamin, *ibid.*, p. 283.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 284.
- 39 *Ibid.*
- 40 Florence Colombani, “Stratégie et violence froide pour le sceptre de Hongkong” (“Strategy and cold violence for the Hong Kong sceptre”), in *Le Monde*, 15 May 2005.
- 41 *Ibid.*
- 42 Benjamin, *ibid.*, p. 299.

Epilogue

- 1 According to statistics published by the Hong Kong Trade Development Council, the Hong Kong film industry produced 63 films in 2004, down from 77 in 2003, the year of the SARS crisis. In 2005, only 50 films were produced, the worst downturn since the plunge in production in 1997–98 following the Asian economic crisis.
- 2 See Ackbar Abbas, “The new Hong Kong cinema and the *déjà disparu*”, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1997), p. 16.
- 3 Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), p. 156.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 152.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 156. Altman sees genre cinema as “a cultural problem-solving device”. His concentration on Hollywood genres and his own bias for the musical (on which he has written a major study, *The American Film Musical* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987], from where the quote is taken, see p. 27) may well have influenced his optimistic line of generic pleasure and civilizational restoration. American genre films are generally considered as redemptive and restorative (the film noir being the only exception): see *The American Film Musical*, pp. 360–361. Since the Hong Kong cinema is patterned after Hollywood, Hong Kong’s genres historically tend to be redemptive and optimistic, at least up until the 1990s when the industry started to decline. To’s films therefore exemplify the characteristics of the changed dynamics of the Hong Kong action film, as I go on to explain in the main text.
- 6 Altman, *Film/Genre*, p. 156.
- 7 Altman, *The American Film Musical*, p. 5.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 See “Author’s Interview with Johnnie To”, Appendix 1.
- 10 See David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p. 159.
- 11 Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres*, p. 33.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

- 14 David Bordwell, “The art cinema as a mode of film practice”, in Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (eds.), *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, p. 719.
- 15 Thomas Schatz, *ibid.*, p. 31.
- 16 Nicole Brenez, “The secrets of movement: The influence of Hong Kong action cinema upon the contemporary French avant-garde”, in *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema*, p. 164.
- 17 I am here paraphrasing the words of Gilles Deleuze who refers to the narrative cinema, as opposed to the experimental cinema, as “a cinema which creates rather than experiments”. See Deleuze, *The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 204.
- 18 Conversation with Patrick Tam, 21 March 2005, Hong Kong.
- 19 See Gilles Deleuze’s “Theses on movement” in *The Movement-Image*, pp. 1–11.
- 20 Deleuze, *The Time-Image*, p. 248.
- 21 Charles Leary points out that Andy Lau’s presence as the star of the project and his involvement on the production side through his company Teamwork Pictures betokens To’s influence because of Lau’s association with To on *Running out of Time* and other films. The rooftop scenes in *Running out of Time* and its sequel were of course a direct line of influence on Lau’s rooftop encounter with Tony Leung in *Infernal Affairs*. See Leary, “*Infernal Affairs*: High concept in Hong Kong”, *Senses of Cinema*, no. 26 (May–June 2003), http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/03/26/internal_affairs.html.
- 22 The box-office grosses of To’s films were *PTU* (HK\$2,984,097), *Breaking News* (HK\$7,842,282), *Throw Down* (HK\$8,231,079), *Election* (HK\$15,895,622), *Election 2* (HK\$13,577,941), while the three *Infernal Affairs* films grossed over HK\$110 million in total. Figures are taken from *Dianying Shuangzhou Kan’s (City Entertainment)* annual tables of first-run films released in Hong Kong.
- 23 Wong Jing’s direction of *Colour of the Truth* (he also wrote the screenplay) makes it the wittiest of the films in the post-97 Hong Kong noir cinema. Regarded as a spin-off of the first *Infernal Affairs* film, it is also a knowing tribute to a number of Johnnie To films, including *The Big Heat* and *The Mission*.
- 24 See Jean-François Lyotard, “Acinema”, in Philip Rosen (ed.), *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 353.

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