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Milkyway meditations: An interview with Johnnie To

ABSTRACT

A wide-ranging career interview with Hong Kong filmmaker Johnnie To. The interview canvasses To's early career and filmic influences, the founding of his production company, Milkyway Image, his flirtation with Hollywood, his taste in acting and his adjustment to new film technologies. In addition, To recounts the making of key films in his oeuvre, reveals his views on the current state of Hong Kong cinema and ruminates on the prospects of a second Election sequel.

KEYWORDS

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Arguably the most indispensable Hong Kong filmmaker of the twenty-first century, Johnnie To Kei-fung has stimulated local film culture on several fronts. As the founder of the Fresh Wave International Short Film Festival (2005–present), he has nurtured a nascent generation of Hong Kong filmmakers, including Wong Chun (*Mad World* [2016]) and Jun Li (*Tracey* [2018], *Drifting* [2021]). He has mentored fledgling directors, from Benny Chan to Soi Cheang, whose work reached maturity in the 2000s. And Milkyway Image, the production house To launched in 1996 with partner Wai Ka-fai, crucially boosted a production sector hobbled by the collapse of major outfits Golden Harvest, Cinema City and D & B Films. To's most substantive contribution, of course, is his own directorial oeuvre. While his flagrantly commercial romance dramas and comedies stabilized a faltering domestic box office, his esoteric crime thrillers caught the attention of overseas admirers, keeping Hong Kong



Figure 1: Johnnie To Kei-fung on the set of *Life without Principle* (2011). 'Making of *Life without Principle*' featurette, *Life without Principle*, DVD extras, Hong Kong. © Media Asia Films.

cinema in the global spotlight at a period of precipitous industrial decline. Today, Johnnie To still looms large both as a major film stylist on the world stage and as a beacon of Hong Kong cinema's future vitality.

Born in 1955 in Hong Kong, To began his directorial career at age 22, shooting television series for Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB). *The Enigmatic Case* (1980), his directorial film debut, left To feeling exposed and underqualified, and he repaired to the television industry for seven years. His return to movies coincided with a gilded era of Hong Kong filmmaking. Essentially a hired hand consigned to studio assignments, To nonetheless contributed several enduring classics to the 'last golden age' of Hong Kong cinema, both as director (*The Big Heat* [1988], *All About Ah-Long* [1989], *The Heroic Trio* [1993]) and producer (*A Moment of Romance* [1990]). Still, he coveted creative autonomy. Tired of ceding authorial control to demiurgic producers (Tsui Hark) and stars (Stephen Chow), To co-founded Milkyway Image in 1996. Initially specializing in brooding crime thrillers indifferent to the bottom line (*The Odd One Dies* [1997], *The Longest Nite* [1998]), the firm soon settled into a dualistic mode of production, shuttling between market-savvy star vehicles (*Needing You...* [2000], *Love on a Diet* [2001]) and personal, auteurist ventures (*The Mission* [1999], *PTU* [2003]).

Soon, a house style coalesced. Regardless of genre, the Milkyway films' diegetic world came forth as an ineluctably deterministic realm (*Turn Left, Turn Right* [2003]; *Election* [2005]). Symmetrical plotlines set doppelgänger protagonists on intersecting paths, their converging trajectories governed by fate. In the romance movies, these 'acted-upon' characters would be embodied by cinegenic star players (Andy Lau, Takeshi Kaneshiro, Sammi Cheng), but the auteurist crime pictures tended to showcase unglamorous performers (Lau Ching-wan, Lam Suet, Anthony Wong) reminiscent of the New Hollywood actors of the 1970s. Visually, the Milkyway product stood out by virtue of its sleek production values and To's artful ability to array figures within anamorphic tableaux. Outrageous set pieces, too, set the Milkyway film apart: think of the laconic shopping mall shootout in *The Mission*, characterized as much



Figure 2: Roy Cheung holds a pose in *The Mission* (1999). Johnnie To (dir.), *The Mission*, 1999. Hong Kong. © Milkyway Image.

by inaction as by rapid-fire gunplay (Figure 2); recall, too, the breathtaking sequence shot that opens *Breaking News* (2004), stretching an epic gunfight across seven minutes of ‘real time’. The films’ sophisticated sound tracks, contrived in postproduction, often functioned in complex, even contrapuntal, relation to the image. Not least, To’s Milkyway productions radiated a unique personal vision at once filtered through and reinvigorating the forms and formulas of popular genre. The best of these films – among them *The Mission*, *PTU*, *Exiled* (2006), *Election*, *Election 2* (2006), *Mad Detective* (2007), *Sparrow* (2008) and *Drug War* (2012) – show Hong Kong cinema at its finest.

Though To’s directorial output tapered in the 2010s, his late work displays an unflagging appetite for artistic experimentation and growth. His 2015 musical, *Office*, flaunts an audacious production design, *Three* (2016) offers a fresh approach to To’s penchant for pictorial stasis, and *Chasing Dream* (2019) juggles a congeries of tones and genres, adroitly hybridizing sports film, musical, romance, comedy and melodrama. Most recently, To returned to television, filming a series for Hong Kong station ViuTV, and is currently directing a new feature film under the Milkyway imprimatur. Today, he remains active as a producer, and he continues to be the public face of Milkyway Image. The following wide-ranging interview was conducted in English on 6 and 8 April 2024, in Kwun Tong, Hong Kong. I am grateful to Kei-chi To for coordinating the interview and for partial translation.

FORMATIVE YEARS AND INFLUENCES

Gary Bettinson (GB): *As a youth, which films and filmmakers made a particular impression on you?*

Johnnie To (JT): I enjoyed *The Sound of Music* (1965) and *West Side Story* (1961). I liked *The Graduate* (1967) – a very interesting film. *The Way We Were* (1973) is very good. I loved *To Sir, with Love* (1967) with Sidney Poitier, a very good actor. This film is like a fantasy: I was a young student when I watched it – if you have a teacher like Sidney Poitier, you’d be very happy! For their style of filmmaking, I liked Sam Peckinpah – especially *Straw Dogs* (1971) – and

Kurosawa. I really liked 1970s Hollywood – it produced many, many good movies. After the Vietnam War, American filmmakers began to reflect upon existence and heroism, and so they made great films like *Bullitt* (1968), *Dirty Harry* (1971) and *The French Connection* (1971). I was also very impressed by the Alain Delon movies directed by Jean-Pierre Melville. I entered the Hong Kong film industry in 1972. At the time I didn't know who Melville was, but after I entered the industry, I realized that he is a great director.

GB: *The filmmakers that influenced your crime movies are well-documented, but your Milkyway output consists of many romantic comedies too. Whose films have informed your work in this genre?*

JT: There are too many to name, but I especially like the old-fashioned situation comedies of Neil Simon – they are so good. I like *The Sunshine Boys* (1975), *The Goodbye Girl* (1977) and some of the films starring Jack Lemmon, especially *The Apartment* (1960), which is a great blend of love story and comedy. These films are like a play on a stage, mounted on a situation.

GB: *When I think of The Apartment, I think of Needing You...*

JT: Exactly! Films like this are not about the plot. They are only about a situation and characters. I find this approach very interesting.

GB: *Early in your career, you trained as an actor. What prompted you to make the shift to directing?*

JT: I didn't want to be an actor, but when I joined TVB, I had to go through a training course. I had to have performance training and learn about different aspects of production. The training in acting was only a one-year course, five days a week, at night-time. You know, Hong Kong has no school to teach people how to act. My teacher studied drama at Yale University and came back to Hong Kong and taught an arts training class. We had to learn acting, dancing, singing. During that one-year training course, I learned something about acting, and after graduating, I would still read some books about acting. But from the day I began the course, I wanted to be a director – I did not want to be an actor. My training in acting was just a stepping stone to directing.

GB: *One of your most successful early ventures as a movie director was All About Ah-Long (1989) (Figure 3). Did you perceive a lineage between this film and the classic Cantonese melodramas of the 1950s?*

JT: Yes. *All About Ah-Long* is very traditional. It's a simple drama. It has the love story between the main actor (Chow Yun-fat) and actress (Sylvia Chang), and it has the family element. At the time I shot this movie, the theatrical market only accepted action movies and comedies, especially the Cinema City style of comedy. Those kinds of comedy movie were very popular with the market, and the box office for them was very good. Basically, I am not that style of filmmaker. I like to watch those kinds of movies, but I'm not very interested in making them. When I shot *The Eighth Happiness* (1988), I thought, 'Oh, this is a lousy movie'. But I was under contract, so I had to do it. I was surprised when *The Eighth Happiness* became a big hit in the market and broke box-office



Figure 3: Chow Yun-fat in the paternal melodrama *All About Ah-Long* (1989). Johnnie To (dir.), *All About Ah-Long*, 1989. Hong Kong. © Cinema City.

records. After that, the studio told me: 'OK, now you can do whatever you want for your next movie'. I did not want to shoot another comedy like *The Eighth Happiness*. I told the studio: 'I want to cast Chow Yun-fat'. I had known him for many years. His dramatic acting is very, very good. So I decided to make *All About Ah-Long*. This was a bold move because, in that period, nobody in Hong Kong went to watch dramas. The producers predicted that the movie would die at the box office. They said, 'You are not on the right track'. But I had been given the chance to make my movie the way I wanted to, so I didn't care what they said. And the movie was a big success.

GB: *In All About Ah-Long, the tone swerves from broad comedy to sentimental romance to tragic melodrama. One of the characteristics of your films is a daring tendency to conjure hairpin shifts in tone. What is your approach to maintaining and modulating a film's overall tone?*

JT: Because these are commercial films, they need to contain a variety of elements. The market is broad. Sometimes we have to obey it and appeal to the market's tastes. But at other times, I will insist on doing something that doesn't cater to the market. It depends. I would say that making a movie is like playing a game. How smart can you be in playing the game? I may want my movie to include some kind of message. When I have a very strong subject or meaning that I want to convey in the movie, then I insist that I won't compromise in order to satisfy the audience's tastes or expectations. On these occasions, we cannot consider the audience. Our movies have a very jumpy style. We know that. We make them this way because we need to attract a wide audience. If you go to the cinema to see our movies, you are not bored. You're excited. But when the movie is over, you will think about it: 'What is Johnnie To talking about? What does the movie mean?' That is important. Sometimes when I make a movie, like *PTU* and *Exiled*, I will be very strict about prioritizing my own thematic concerns. With these two movies, I set out to make myself happy; I didn't set out primarily to make you (the audience) happy. These are personal movies. *The Mission* was like this too.

GB: Besides *The Mission*, *Exiled*, and *PTU*, which of your films do you regard as primarily 'personal' ventures?

JT: *Sparrow*, *Life without Principle* and *Throw Down* (2004). *Election* belongs to this category too. In Hong Kong history, no-one has made a gangster movie like this. It's not like *Young and Dangerous* (1996) – there are no heroes in *Election*. The gangster figure in *Election* is not a hero.

GB: Do you consider any of your pre-Milkyway films personal works?

JT: Only one – *Loving You* (1995). It was the first movie where I tried to express fully my own ideas and not consider any market demands. This was the first time I changed my style of movie.

1990s HONG KONG

GB: Speaking of finding one's own style, in the 1990s Wong Kar-wai made a strong impact on Hong Kong cinema and it seemed that many local filmmakers were briefly influenced by his cinematic style and approach to storytelling. Did Wong's films prompt you to rethink your own personal style during this period?

JT: No. His films are different. I think he is one of the best directors. But he only makes one kind of movie. Maybe the whole of his career equals one movie! I think you can say that, in the past thirty years, he is the best director in Hong Kong.

GB: In the early 1990s, real-life triads infiltrated the movie industry. Did this development have any concrete impact on your day-to-day filmmaking or your career in general?

JT: Actually, the triads came into the film business even earlier than the 1990s – in the 1970s and 80s. But they were not so prevalent until the Hong Kong movie business became very profitable in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Then, the gangsters wanted to make movies. It was easy for them to make money, and they had dirty methods to make an actor or actress appear in their movies.

GB: Did they interfere with you at all?

JT: I was one of the lucky ones. Of course, sometimes I had to do it, but they would respect me. I was a director at Shaw Brothers and Cinema City, to whom I was under contract. I was not allowed to make any movies outside of these companies. This was a rule fixed in my contract. Well, the triads would not challenge the big companies. I was protected under the umbrella of the company. By 1995 or 1996, the triads had all left the film industry.

GB: You directed many films before launching *Milkyway Image* in 1996. Which of these films do you consider particularly important in your artistic development as a director?

JT: I can answer that question not by mentioning a particular movie but by mentioning a situation – a situation that influenced the founding of *Milkyway*

Image. The situation changed when I shot a movie with Stephen Chow called *Justice, My Foot!* (1992). It did very well at the box office. And then he and I shot another movie, *The Mad Monk* (1993). This time, he didn't listen to me. He kept on changing things. I really suffered making this movie; I had never felt like this on a movie before. But I had to finish it because it had been pre-sold in Taiwan. Stephen Chow is a very good actor, but he almost became a king – he wanted to control everything. And after this movie, I asked myself: as a filmmaker, do I want to be an engineer or an artist? If I am only like an engineer, I will gather a team to create a commercial movie with a famous actor or actress, combined with a basic formula. At this time, I was in my mid-30s – this was the right time to decide what my future would be. Around 1994, I stopped making movies. This was just after I directed *The Heroic Trio*. The three actresses – Maggie Cheung, Michelle Yeoh and Anita Mui – were very good to work with. They really liked listening to me. I enjoyed making *The Heroic Trio*, but the movie was not popular in Hong Kong. I think it made HKD 7 million at the box office – not good. After that I only produced one movie, *Only Fools Fall in Love* (1995), directed by Vincent Kok. In 1994, I directed no movies. Then, I decided it was time to be a director, not an engineer. I started to shoot a movie – *Loving You* (Figure 4). With this movie, I started to think about what I wanted to be as a director. On this movie, I had no calculation, no commercial consideration for the box office. And so, during this period, and for the first time in my career, I started to think of myself as an auteur. I tried hard to maintain what I needed as a director. This is what prompted me to launch Milkyway Image. The philosophy that governed the company from the start until now is simply original thinking. Every Milkyway movie must be original, not based on other filmmakers or other movies. Being original is very important for Milkyway Image.

GB: *What was the thinking behind the company's name?*

JT: 'Milkyway' means 'unlimited'. Nobody knows how big the universe is; you have to think about it. 'Milkyway' simply means: unlimited thinking



Figure 4: Characteristically purged of vanity and star glamour, Lau Ching-wan stars in *Loving You* (1995), a personal breakthrough for director To. Johnnie To (dir.), *Loving You*, 1995. Hong Kong. © Milkyway Image.

and creativity. 'Image' has to do with movies – motion pictures. The picture can *move*. So, the visual image is very important to me. Don't always rely on dialogue. Don't make a static image. I like to minimize the dialogue. Let the audience concentrate on the image. It's a *movie*. Perhaps other directors don't have this kind of style, but for me the picture can tell the story. No dialogue – only the language of film.

GB: *Alfred Hitchcock called this pure cinema...*

JT: Yes! Wonderful. We can do it. So I tried to make movies like this. *The Mission* and *PTU* are good examples of my approach. You can count on one hand how much dialogue is in these movies. The audience watching the movie has no need to read the subtitles – they can just watch my pictures and they will understand everything. One of my movies that doesn't have much dialogue is *The Longest Nite*. Tony Leung is so good in it and so is Lau Ching-wan. This is one of my movies that I like, but I did not use my name in the credits; I used my assistant's name (Patrick Yau). I built the story with Wai Ka-fai, who wrote only a synopsis, not a script. And I told the director, Yau, how to shoot it. After three days of shooting, I said to him: 'No – this is not like what I envisioned, so I will shoot some scenes for you'. But still he cannot follow my example. So I said, 'Okay, I will shoot the movie'. But I still used his name on the credits. It doesn't matter; every newcomer has to try. But at the end, I told him: 'You are not a movie director. You have not got that potential, but you do have abilities as an assistant director'. So he went back to shoot a TV series, which was a very big success.

GB: *His directorial credit also appears on Expect the Unexpected (1998)...*

JT: Yes, and *The Odd One Dies* – this was also directed by me. I gave him three chances to try directing – three times! In the end, I told him to go to TV.

GB: *What about Benny Chan and A Moment of Romance on which you were the nominal producer?*

JT: The same. But Benny Chan was very smart. I shot almost 60 per cent of the footage of the first *A Moment of Romance* movie. We just had different ways of thinking. It was not that he was not a good director.

GB: *How have you changed as a producer over the years? Unlike the case of A Moment of Romance and the three films attributed to Patrick Yau, you were reportedly 'hands-off' during the shooting of Trivisa (2016).*

JT: After *Expect the Unexpected*, I decided I didn't want to intervene in another director's work. If I am producing a film, I will say to the director: 'You do it'. I didn't intervene in a movie again until I produced *Trivisa*. I was very, very angry about *Trivisa*. I had talked to the directors about the concept of this movie, but the finished movie was not what I had conceived. I was not very satisfied with the result. Yau Nai-hoi was one of the producers and the script supervisor of *Trivisa* – he oversaw the whole project. My original idea for *Trivisa* came from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Remember the three witches who influence the main character? Just a single thought can change a character's mindset; a single suggestion can change his fate. This was my original

concept for *Trivisa*; it was the meaning of the story. Hubris is the handicap of human beings. Humans have always been like this. This theme is so important to me. But in the finished movie, this theme does not come through. This made me very angry.

GB: *Still, Trivisa was very popular upon release.*

JT: Yeah – its success was very lucky! *Eye in the Sky* (Yau Nai-hoi 2007) was the same. When I watched the footage after the shooting, I almost died! But I produced *Accident* (2009), by Soi Cheang, and I never touched it. I never intervened in the shooting of *Motorway* (2012) and *Mad Fate* (2023) either.

GB: *Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, many of Hong Kong's leading directors migrated to Hollywood. I understand that you were invited to direct Hollywood projects such as Collateral (subsequently directed by Michael Mann, 2004), I Am Legend (Francis Lawrence, 2007) and The American (Anton Corbijn, 2010). What factors prevented you from directing movies in Hollywood?*

JT: The first Hong Kong directors to go to the US were John Woo, Tsui Hark and Ringo Lam. The same producer – Moshe Diamant – invited all three of them to Hollywood. He wanted me to be the next one to move to Hollywood. I read many scripts but everything I read was not suitable for me. John Woo was more senior than me; Tsui Hark at the time was the number one director in Hong Kong, and Ringo was a very good director too – but in Hollywood, they were doing C-grade movies. I had no interest in doing that. So if I had continued to work in LA, it would have been a waste of my time. After that, Creative Artists Agency (CAA) came to the Toronto Film Festival to invite me to join their agency. At that time, I didn't know who CAA was! They asked me if I was interested in making American movies. I told them: 'I don't want to shoot a movie in Hollywood just for the sake of it. I want to have a story I like'. They gave me many scripts. Of course, I soon realized that the good scripts were being sent only to the big Hollywood directors, not to me! Later, a producer named Arthur Sarkissian, who was the producer of *Rush Hour* (1998) starring Jackie Chan, came to Hong Kong to shoot *Rush Hour*, and he came to visit me on the set of *Fulltime Killer* (2001). He said, 'if you come to LA, we can talk about working together'. I said, 'Okay'. One or two years later, I went to LA and he told me: 'We have to make a movie together'. He found a project with a famous investor, Studio Canal – a remake of *Le Cercle Rouge* (*The Red Circle*) (1970), the French movie directed by Jean-Pierre Melville. I really like this movie – how can I remake it better than the original? When I read the script, I said: 'No – it has been written in the Hollywood style, not the European style'. They told me: 'You can change the script'. So Wai Ka-fai began to change the script. Month after month went by. Finally I said, 'This movie must shoot now!' He said, 'No, I have not finished my script'. I said, 'It doesn't matter!' And then Arthur Sarkissian told me that a very popular actor would like to meet me to discuss starring in the remake of *The Red Circle*. His name is Orlando Bloom. So I went to LA, and we had a meeting together. By this time, we had assembled a good cast. We had Chow Yun-fat and Clive Owen lined up to star. All three of the actors said, 'If Johnnie likes the script, I will do it'. But I didn't like the script, so how could I shoot the movie? I said, 'No – until I fix the script, I can't make the movie'. Eventually the producer said, 'If you miss this chance, then we won't make the movie'. At a certain

point, I said, 'Forget it – no more'. I was very busy working in Hong Kong during this period, from 2000 to 2010. I was shooting movies non-stop, so I didn't care about finding work in Hollywood. Whatever, I can say that CAA was very good. Compared with other Hollywood agencies, CAA is one of the few that is interested in character-driven stories.

GB: *Johnnie To's Collateral is an enticing proposition.*

JT: The script I read was set in New York, not Los Angeles (as in the Michael Mann film). The studio could not convince me about the quality of the story. Who cares about Tom Cruise? I don't like him – his acting is so lousy. But of course, he is a superstar. But how can we change his persona and acting style? We can't.

GB: *What style of acting suits your taste? Which actors best embody your taste in acting?*

JT: I really like Steve McQueen. He never does too much on screen: he's always very subtle. The very famous scene in *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1968) when he plays chess with Faye Dunaway is very, very good. He uses very simple movements. I saw many movies where he is like this – *Papillon* (1973), *The Great Escape* (1963). How much dialogue does he have in *The Great Escape*? He is one of the great character actors. He is a very good example of the Method style of acting. Of course, Robert De Niro and Al Pacino are very good. De Niro in *Taxi Driver* (1976), *The Godfather Part II* (1974) and *Raging Bull* (1980) acts so well – you believe his performances. I remember seeing Pacino in *Serpico* (1973). His acting was so great, so strong. *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975) – wow! The actors in the 1970s were the best. Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate* – you believe he is that character, and then in *Straw Dogs* he's playing someone completely different. Hoffman, De Niro, Pacino – none of them has a very handsome face; their talent is all about character acting rather than how physically attractive they are. I like Jack Nicholson in *Chinatown* (1974) and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) too.

GB: *What about Hong Kong actors?*

JT: In Hong Kong, even some of the best actors and actresses don't go 'inside'. They haven't learnt any theory about acting. They can only copy the actors who came before them. Many people ask me: 'Who is the best actor in Hong Kong?' If I have to answer, I will say Tony Leung Chiu-wai and Anthony Wong. They know how to act.

GB: *Tony Leung has the sort of understated quality that you admire in McQueen.*

JT: Yes. One actor who everyone tells me is marvellous is Anthony Hopkins. They say, 'his acting is so good' – but he is *acting*. It is just 'outside' acting: he shows us how to act. He acts like he is still on the stage; he has a very stage-based style of performance. I like him in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) and *The Father* (2020). He acts very well in those movies, but he's still *acting*. Another example is Daniel Day-Lewis. Too much acting! Everything in *There Will Be Blood* (2007) is so good – the script, everything – but I don't like Daniel Day-Lewis's performance. He overacts.

FILM TECHNIQUE AND TECHNOLOGY

GB: *In the same years that Milkyway Image emerged, the Hong Kong film industry was undergoing a quite significant technological shift, namely, the transition to synchronized sound recording. You were a conspicuous hold-out in the shift to sync sound. Why was this?*

JT: It's because I had no money! It had to do with the budget. The situation is still much the same today. I cannot guarantee to an investor that my movie will do well at the box office, but I *can* guarantee that I will try to make a good movie. So if an investor is willing to finance my movie without a guarantee of box-office success, then I will accept a limited budget. I always have a small budget. I have to protect myself against commercial failure. Right now, I am shooting a new movie and we have no synchronized sound recording.

GB: *Without direct sound recording, you can work faster, can't you?*

JT: Fast or slow, it's not important to me. I can shoot one shot per day. I can shoot very quick too.

GB: *Alfred Hitchcock claimed to derive most of his creative satisfaction from the preproduction phase, whereas he found the shooting phase far less fulfilling. What aspect of filmmaking most stimulates you?*

JT: I am one of those directors who does no planning. I only prepare things when I know that a particular scene or shot is going to be a problem. If a shot is not easy to control, then I will prepare. Otherwise, there is no need for preparation. For me, when it comes to how to handle the scene or the shot, I need freedom. I just follow my imagination and decide on what the shots will be when I come to the set. But if I am doing something like the opening shot of *Breaking News* – which is a single shot that is seven minutes long – then I know that this is a great problem for me and everyone in the cast and crew. In a case like this, I will do rehearsals and make sure that everyone knows what is needed. Only in such cases will I have the patience to rehearse, rehearse, rehearse. Another example is *Three* (Figure 5). For one particular sequence,



Figure 5: *In Three (2016), an ostentatiously decelerated set piece depicts a bloody shootout in a busy hospital ward. Director To packs every cranny of the anamorphic frame with eye-catching detail. Johnnie To (dir.), Three, 2016. Hong Kong. © Milkyway Image.*

all the actors had to learn how to make their bodies behave in slow motion. The slow-motion effect is produced by the actors – all the actors, even the extras. We spent one month training all the actors how to balance their bodies so that it looks like they are moving in slow motion. That was a very big challenge.

GB: *How exactly did you prepare the opening shot of Breaking News? Did you map out the action using storyboards?*

JT: The first thing I did was choose a street to shoot in. The street needed to be able to support the action, and it needed to be a place where we could shoot without causing any disturbance to people living in the area. If we shot in a place that had shops and residential properties, then we would receive too many complaints. So I chose a street that was soon to be demolished. The second thing I did was plan how to handle all the movements and figure out where the actors would run. I imagined the whole scene in my mind. We had a small budget, and renting a camera crane is expensive, so in rehearsal I used a wooden plank as a substitute for a crane. I planned the whole scene step by step. I broke the shot down into about ten segments. Then, I rehearsed the first segment with the crew, so that they would know all the camera movements for the first part of the scene. Once we had practised the first segment and all the people on the crew understood what I needed, then we prepared the second segment. We rehearsed it until all the people were familiar with the second segment. Then, we rehearsed segments one and two together. Then, we rehearsed the first, second and third segments all together. And so on – we went step by step until the crew knew all the segments put together. Now, all this was only a simulation – we did all this without the camera; there were no actors or actresses on the set during these rehearsals. We worked only with the crew and the fake camera crane, the wooden plank. We rehearsed for almost three days. On the second day, the real crane arrived along with all the camera equipment. Now I could do it for real. In the morning, the actors and actresses came, and we had them rehearse the choreographed movements with the camera following them. Of course, there is a lot of gunfighting in the scene and many explosives. During the rehearsal, we couldn't allow the actors to discharge the guns because otherwise we would need to re-dress the set, which would take three or four days to do. So they could not empty their guns. The same issue applied when we actually shot the scene: no-one could make a mistake because if they did then we would need to reinstall everything – the car, the set, everything would need to be re-dressed, and we would have to wait days for this to be done. Another thing I worried about was the amount of camera movement in the scene. There is a cable that controls the head of the camera, the movement of the camera. With all the tracking movements in the scene, with the camera turning one way and then another, the cable could get twisted up into a knot. It would be easy to make the cable and the camera jam if we were not careful. This was one thing I worried about. A second thing is that we were using a 1000-foot magazine. Normally the magazine is 400 feet. I worried that our long take would jam the film. And one more worry was the newspaper that floats from the top of the building onto the car parked in the street (Figure 6). The newspaper was controlled by a wire. In sum, the scene presented some problems, but it was also very exciting. The day I shot the scene, I said to the cast and crew: 'If I don't say "cut" then everyone must continue to perform the scene'. The



Figure 6: A newspaper floats perfectly into place in the stunning opening sequence shot from *Breaking News* (2004), Johnnie To (dir.), *Breaking News*, 2004. Hong Kong. © Milkyway Image.

newspaper took seven attempts before I got what I needed. It kept landing in the wrong position. When this happened, I'd say, 'Cut! Cut!' before the actors could launch into the gunfight. It's lucky that this newspaper bit took place near the beginning of the scene. Finally, on the seventh attempt, the newspaper landed in the correct position, on the car windshield. And then we still had five minutes of action left to shoot! It was all very complicated and very tense. It was one of the biggest challenges I have had – bigger than betting money in a casino! I can say that it's not very good, but it's a success.

GB: *What do you mean?*

JT: The end result is not perfect. But we tried. I appreciate the team and the actors – all the people on the set. There was so much work involved. Behind the camera, many crew members were working to pull off the shot. Almost ten crew people were literally running behind the camera, out of shot. When the camera moved, some of the props needed to not be there, so the crew needed to remove them or cover them up. So many people were working behind the camera – it was like dancing. The focus puller and the dolly grip were very tense. They were very relieved and excited after the shot was finished. We did it. In my life, this was one of the very big challenges.

GB: *There are some celebrated opening shots in movie history that flaunt virtuosic long takes – most famously, Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958) and Robert Altman's *The Player* (1992). Were you thinking of such models when conceiving the opening shot of *Breaking News*?*

JT: No, but I do like Orson Welles; I like his directing. For Hollywood, it is easy to do this kind of shot, but for Hong Kong it's a big challenge. And I can say that in all of world cinema, I haven't seen a shot like the one in *Breaking News*. I see many movies where they use CG to create such shots. I had no CG. They can make virtual camera movement nowadays. It's cheating. I think there are too many CG scenes in movies now. So it is too stupid of you, Johnnie To, to shoot the scene practically [laughs]. It's all green screen technology now. It is not the same. But I always think that technology is very important for the development of movies. Filmmakers started out with silent film, then added

sound, then colour, then CinemaScope – these developments all came from innovations in technology. It is necessary to have technological change.

GB: The Hong Kong film industry has undergone many technical and practical changes since you began directing in 1980. What have been the main changes in your filmmaking methods across the course of your career?

JT: I'm still using my old methods. I still use the traditional tools: the acting, the music, the set design – all the things you can touch – are enough to make a movie. I do not have to follow the new technology. But young filmmakers have to. They have to try to be more fresh. Nowadays, for people born in the 2000s, they come out of film school and they have to think about the new technological landscape. But not me. I still like the tactile method of making movies. You know, Hong Kong is not like the West. Hong Kong directors always have a very good knowledge of the camera. In my case, I decide everything myself. On the set, I will say which lens I want to use, how to move the camera, what lighting I want, how to shoot coverage. In Hong Kong, directors like me do it ourselves. In the West, directors delegate these decisions to the director of photography (DP). Well, I can be the DP *and* the director. I like the photographic camera. Since the industry changed to digital, it is not the same. With celluloid, I would do the lab work by myself. I miss this part of the process. The camera is very special. The detail in the image is so good. I taught myself all about the film camera in the 1980s, when I first had enough money to buy a camera of my own. Before cinema became digital, I owned more than twenty cameras. The digital image is not as interesting as celluloid – it has no life.

HONG KONG CINEMA: PRESENT AND FUTURE

GB: Many critics contend that Hong Kong cinema is dead or dying. When you look at Hong Kong movies today, do you see a radical break with the cinema of the late twentieth century, or is there more continuity than some critics perceive?

JT: I can say that the peak time has passed. I don't know when it will come back. But I do not agree that movies in Hong Kong have died. In Hong Kong in the 1980s, if you made a movie, you earned money almost immediately because of the healthy market. But in the 1990s, it changed: the salaries of the stars became too high, and the market could not support this. This situation contributed to the Hong Kong industry's decline in the 1990s. If you want to lift the industry back up, it's not easy. Hong Kong cinema is tied to China now. And the situation is the same in China: they have made the actors' salaries very high. Even if you offer to pay Stephen Chow HKD 100 million to be in a movie, he can still consider whether he wants to do it or not. He is the director, he is the producer, he is the main actor. He can ask HKD 200 million for a movie. It's similar with Andy Lau – he can command about HKD 60 million per movie. The same with Tony Leung. It was like this in the 1990s: Jet Li, Jackie Chan, Chow Yun-fat, Chow Sing-chi – we gave them almost half of the whole movie's budget! You know, many of the big-budget movies are not happening in Hong Kong nowadays. These productions all go to China. But in the China market, they have many restrictions, such as censorship, that will spoil the filmmaker's creativity. Zhang Yimou used to make many good movies before. But after that, his films go down and down and down. I heard that his

new one (*Full River Red* [2023]) is very good, but I have no time to see it. I like Zhang Yimou's old movies. Nowadays he makes huge box-office epics. With his propaganda movies, he makes over 3 billion dollars at the box office, but they are very lousy movies. They are popular in China but in Hong Kong they make a loss – no-one wants to watch them. A lousy movie can make money in China. With a lousy movie, you can become a rich man! Anyway, the young Hong Kong filmmakers are coming out of film school, but they haven't been taught well. They need to know the basics. You have to teach student filmmakers how to think creatively. They need to know about cinema history. The young generation in Hong Kong is too secure over the past twenty or thirty years. It doesn't compare with the early careers of me, Ann Hui, Tsui Hark and Ringo Lam, when we were very young and started to make movies and entered the film industry. We needed a job. We had to fight for work opportunities. Nowadays, young people are too secure. It is too easy for them. They have no struggle. What is your path? Why do you choose filmmaking as your career? Do you have the talent and the passion to succeed? Many do not. Nowadays, there are many new directors who receive money from the government to make social-issue movies. Many of these social-issue movies are lousy. Often when young Hong Kong filmmakers make social-issue movies, they don't give hope to the audience. Even if their movie is about a social issue, they should still make movies that people will enjoy; it's not only all about suffering. Some of these new directors think making movies is a piece of cake. They have never seen *Taxi Driver* or *The Godfather* (1972). They don't know the history of world cinema. Their education is very narrow-minded.

GB: *In your view, who are the best Hong Kong directors working today?*

JT: Soi Cheang is one of the good directors in Hong Kong now (Figure 7).

GB: *What do you consider to be his special attributes as a director?*

JT: His command of camera language is very good. He doesn't know how to make a script, I must say [laughs]. But his camera sense is so good. He can use the camera very well, and his shot compositions are very strong. He has his own style. I tell the young filmmakers, 'Try to make what belongs to *you*. Don't



Figure 7: Director Soi Cheang's *Mad Fate* (2023) displays the sort of cogently staged and dramatically pregnant compositions associated with its producer, Johnnie To. Soi Cheang (dir.), *Mad Fate*, 2023. Hong Kong. © Milkyway Image.

direct like other people. You should not make movies like Johnnie To or Wong Kar-wai or Tsui Hark – no, it should come from *you*.'

GB: *Given the tightening of mainland control in recent times, would you be willing to work with/in mainland China again?*

JT: If they allow me to do what I want, I would do it. As long as a film-maker is free to explore his ideas, it's okay. I do not accept Communism. No freedom to speak, no freedom of the press, no freedom of religion – this I will not accept. If I *need* to go to China to shoot, it is because the script requires that I have to go there. I won't care. It's not wrong to work in China. I wouldn't want to make a movie that I don't believe in myself, like a Chinese propaganda movie about the Korean War. I cannot accept that China is a democratic country. They said they are! They give propaganda speeches, and they say that the power goes to the people. Democratic rule under Communism – it's ridiculous. Many Chinese producers came to talk with me and asked me to make a movie in China. I said, 'Only if I can do everything my way and make the decisions – will you allow me to do this?' No – they don't want this.

GB: *I gather that Wai Ka-fai is preparing Mad Detective 2?*

JT: He has finished it. It's not exactly a *Mad Detective* sequel. It has the same actors but it's not exactly a sequel. It has similar elements as *Mad Detective* (Figure 8).

GB: *Did you consider co-directing the film with Wai?*

JT: Now Mr Wai wants to direct by himself. He wants to go this way with his career. I said, 'Okay, good'. When we worked together in the past, we were very happy. Now he's so happy still. Wai Ka-fai has been a big influence on my creativity and on my ideas about script writing. I can say that in Hong Kong he is the number one screenwriter. He can write in any kind of style or genre. No-one in Hong Kong compares to him.

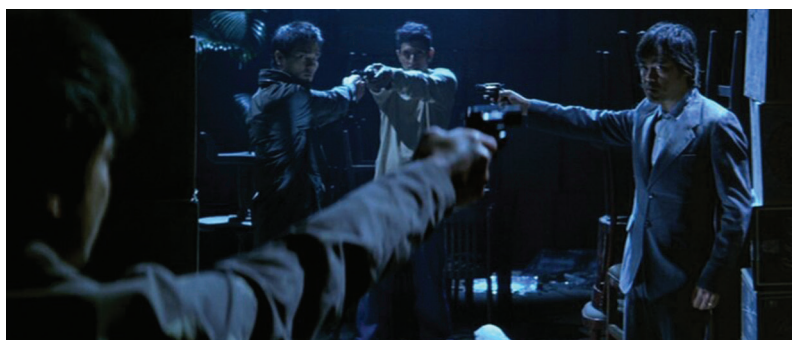


Figure 8: A tense faceoff in *To and Wai Ka-fai's Mad Detective* (2007) evokes both the traditional heroic bloodshed genre and Orson Welles' classic film noir *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947). Wai Ka-fai (dir.), *Mad Detective*, 2007. Hong Kong. © Milkyway Images.

GB: *Are the difficulties in bringing Election 3 to the screen chiefly political?*

JT: Yes. If you want to tell the truth about the situation now in the triad world and make a story that is based on true incidents, then you are challenging the Hong Kong government, the power holders. When the British controlled Hong Kong, it was not like this. The gangsters were far away from the government back then. There was an incident in 2016 when C. Y. Leung, the former chief executive, was spotted sitting in a restaurant with the head of the triads. This really happened. No-one expected Hong Kong would become like this. During the days under British rule, if you were a policeman, you could not make friends or have any relationship with gangsters. The government can't stop me making *Election 3*, but when the movie is ready for release, they will, of course, censor it. We are not allowed to say something bad about the political powers. The whole movie would be censored! If I don't agree to make the cuts they demand, then I cannot show the movie in Hong Kong. And if I try to show it outside of Hong Kong, then I will be in breach of Article 23 and the National Security Law. According to these laws, you shouldn't say anything bad about Hong Kong. The government's stance is: 'If you are an enemy, no matter how far you go, we are going to come after you'. Maybe when I get older and if I don't want to live in Hong Kong anymore, then I will shoot *Election 3*. I really appreciate my decision in 1990, after the Tiananmen Square revolution, to emigrate to Canada. I am a Canadian citizen; I hold a Canadian passport. I like Canada. But I don't want to leave Hong Kong until I cannot accept the political situation here any longer. Maybe when I get old and when I have the time and the energy, I will shoot *Election 3*. And after shooting, I will go to... anywhere... somewhere outside China. I am a Canadian and a Hong Kongese; I am not Chinese. I am not Chinese! I am Hong Kongese.

GB: *Do you have a story mapped out for Election 3?*

JT: It's about true incidents. These incidents form the basis of the story. The values and history of the gangster in Hong Kong. What is the value of the gangsters? The Hong Kong triad is known as the Black Society. How did the Black Society become the White Society? How did they become integrated into the 'good' side of society? Whether or not I can make *Election 3* will be decided by God [laughs]. If God allows to give me a good situation, then I will try. So maybe the time will come when there is no more Milkyway Image in Hong Kong. While the Milkyway team are all together with me, I don't want to bring them too much trouble. But I want to make *Election 3* someday. I really want to do it.

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