

IN CONVERSATION WITH PETER CHAN HO SUN

by Thomas Podvin (*that's Shanghai* – HKCinemagic.com¹)

INTRODUCTION

I met Peter Chan twice in Shanghai, and each time the conversation was a delight. No need to ask him to elaborate his answers. Chan would explore any possibilities a question offers and gives very detailed answers on various levels.

Chan is indeed an interesting filmmaker to talk to. He has not only a wide understanding of the cinema industry in Asia, but he has also experienced the Hollywood system first hand (in 1998 for the DreamWorks produced *The Love Letter*). He is a filmmaker interested in both HK and the rest of the world. He sees his films within the whole picture and while talking, he effortlessly moves from one layer of conversation to the next. If not tired and with a double latte Chan talks at once about the making of his films, his childhood, movie-making techniques, his love for *Casablanca*, the situation of the world cinema, his love for women and so on.

All these elements, which are interconnected in his cinema, are presented below in our two conversations.



Photo credit: Hugo Hu.

¹ Links of interest:

Peter Chan <http://www.hkcinemagic.com/en/people.asp?id=9>

Perhaps Love <http://www.hkcinemagic.com/en/movie.asp?id=8304>

The Warlords <http://www.hkcinemagic.com/en/movie.asp?id=9470>

Applause Pictures <http://www.hkcinemagic.com/en/studio.asp?id=77>

UFO <http://www.hkcinemagic.com/en/studio.asp?id=11>

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I. PERHAPS LOVE

Many thanks to producer Zoe Chen at the Ruddy Morgan Organization who kindly helped us catching up with Peter Chan. I met Chan in Shanghai after the few hectic months he spent for the promotion of the *Perhaps Love* release in mainland China on Dec 1st, 2005. We are ever so grateful to Chan, for his kindness and patience to discuss in much detail his career and love for cinema.

I.1. Heroes Shed No Tears

I.1.1. Into the Thai Jungle

Thomas Podvin: Your first filmmaking experience was with John Woo's *Heroes Shed No Tears*. What exactly drew you to the film industry?

Peter Chan: It was a long time ago. I was actually back from a summer vacation, and I was recruited to be an interpreter on the film --that required someone who knew films, who could speak English, Chinese and Thai. I spent a big part of my adolescence in Thailand; I spent six years in Thailand, around my junior to high school age. And my family lived in Thailand and still does. So when John Woo was shooting that movie in Thailand, it was the best way to learn. I was the only one to understand everybody, nobody understood each other. I knew exactly what was going on, and everyone came to me. That was a great learning curve.

I was supposed to go back to college after that summer. The film production got postponed and last until Christmas. So I decided to work on another picture for a year. It was a movie in Barcelona with Jackie Chan and Sammo Hung [*Wheels on Meals*].

Then I went to Yugoslavia to work on another Jackie Chan's movie [*Armour of God*]. So one picture became two pictures, became three pictures.

I.1.2. From cold turkey to great learning experience

This John Woo's movie is very trash.

It's John Woo at the lowest of his career. That was before John Woo became John Woo; that was before *A Better Tomorrow*. When I saw ABT in theatre, I actually saw a lot of the John Woo I saw in *Heroes Shed No Tears*, which was the first Woo's gunfight movie. It was the first time there was slow motion during action and the first time people stopped to chat in the middle of the battlefield. As if they were never getting shot at. It's a very romantic version of a gunfight. That was his first gunfight movie

Actually, the version that was distributed isn't the movie Woo's made. His cut was shelved for two years and then re-cut by producers.

It's not John Woo's movie. I was actually involved in the post-production because I was stuck

with the producer who was fighting with Woo. When Woo walked away from the movie and also left the studio - he left Golden Harvest to join Cinema City - he went to Taiwan where he had two of the worst years of his life. Then he came back to Hong Kong and worked for Tsui Hark. And they made *A Better Tomorrow*.

During these two years, we re-cut and re-shoot a lot of stuff for *Heroes Shed No Tears*, and what is left was only half John Woo's. The problem was Woo was furious, very angry about that movie. But Golden Harvest could make a movie and not release it if they think it was not going to work. So they waited and waited. It would not have been released if it wasn't for ABT. When ABT came out, they finally decided to release it. And Woo was very unhappy about that.

I.1.3. On the spot director

Were you influenced by Woo at this very early stage?

I don't think I was influenced by John. Because the kind of films I make and the kind of films he makes are quite different. However, as a film student, I learnt most about actually making movie in my first movie with Woo, because Woo is a very talented and 'on the spot' director. What I learnt from him is to never break down shots beforehand. After saying "cut, good take," Woo would walk from that take at the end of that shot to find a new shot. And on every shot he would walk to find a new shot. Which means that there is not really a plan. There is a blueprint of the shot lists, but not really a plan.

And I learnt from that. I was an interpreter [on *Heroes Shed No Tears*] and we worked with Thai, Korean, European, French (there were two French actors in the movie) and I always followed him. I know exactly how he came up with the ideas on the spot, and I needed to translate it to other people. And then, it became my guiding principle. I never break shots, even for a musical [*Perhaps Love*]. There was one scene with a trapeze for which I had to break the shot because of the CGI. But apart from that I never break shots. I believe when you are on set, you sort of know what you're doing, but you don't know exactly what you're doing until you are there. And that I believe it's my way to make a movie, a way learnt from John Woo. I really find that it was the most effective way to make a movie. But I didn't learn the way he actually set shots.

Woo often uses many cameras at once to shot at different angles. Is it your method too?

Actually no. The first time I used different camera angles was for *Perhaps Love*. Just two cameras. I am still pretty primitive you know. One camera, three actors, maybe a dolly...

I.2. Perhaps Love

I.2.1. A Musical Love Story

***Perhaps love* is a musical love story within a story, with songs making for a third of the film. Elaborate on the concept of the movie.**

Up to now, all my movies have been love stories. It might change but it hasn't changed so far. I've tried different genres; I tried comedy, love story, horror. [*Three*] was still a love story, a love story based on a supernatural situation. And this one. With Hong Kong filmmaking you got to keep reinventing yourself. Because the market for HK films or Chinese films is so irregular and small. Even now, when China is big but the number of people going to the cinemas is very small.

A lot of people see our movies, but they see them on DVD or VCD, and mostly in a pirated version. Which means the money never go back to the investors. So for the investors, the movie business is a very risky business. And a director gets more influential because the movie is seen, but it doesn't help to recoup costs. Which make movie making a very difficult enterprise.

When we decided to make this film [*Perhaps Love*], the whole purpose was to bring the audience back to theatres to watch love and musical. We thought that if we made a love story most of the audience would prefer to watch it at home. What would you add to a love story to persuade them to go back to the big screen?

I had to try to make the love story works within the musical context. At the same time, if you've seen my work, my films are mostly quite reality-based. Which means it is quite apart from traditional musical. So when I planned to make a musical, all my friends and people around me were surprised. I was the last person they expect would make a musical. I had to find a way to portray music and musical elements in a very realistic setting. That is the 'movie within the movie' plot.

It gave a legitimate reason for the actors to sing. The reason I needed a legitimate reason was because when actors go back to the dialogue scenes I wanted the audience to feel it's real, I wanted the audience to feel "I am him, I am her." If you have the actors singing in the middle of the movie, it's very hard for the audience to relate to the characters.

We worked diligently on the script to make two extremes come together, which is the over the top imagination of musical and stylish and unreal situations of a musical versus very real situations of a real contemporary love story.

1.2.2. Three sources of inspiration

Were you not influenced by *Moulin Rouge* or *Chicago*?

No, even though a lot of people think that, I denied it. *Perhaps Love* seems to be like *Moulin Rouge*, but it is really not like this movie. It was only my way to make a movie within a movie, where they sing. To me it's a movie about film people. First and foremost it's a love story. Also, with the movie within the movie technique, I get to pay homage on a sidebar to films I love.

Perhaps Love is probably influenced by three kinds of movies. One is a very old Hollywood movie. First and foremost, in term of the core of the movie, it's influenced by *Casablanca* [Michael Curtiz, 1942]. I've admitted over and over again that deep in my mind I've been inspired so much by *Casablanca* that I remade it three times -- in my mind. Even though

people won't think it's *Casablanca*, *Comrades*, *Almost a Love Story* to me is *Casablanca*. *Perhaps Love* to me is *Casablanca*. In *Comrades*, I had Eric Tsang play Ingrid Bergman's husband [Ed.: Victor Laszlo played by Paul Henreid], then in *Perhaps Love*, I had Jacky Cheung playing the husband, which is the character I love most in *Casablanca*.

In one way it's the same sentiments, if you take all the style, the contemporary, the music out of it, you'll actually find at the very core of it, a very old fashioned melodrama. Because I grew up watching old Hollywood movies, I am very much influenced by that sentiment and I feel like in this present day and age we have lost that sentiment and I've always wanted to recreate that in a contemporary setting.

The second influence, if you talk about the musical style or the pacing between the music and the reality, is *Cabaret* [Bob Fosse, 1972], which is my favorite musical. If you take the music out of this movie, it's a complete straight narrative love story. There is no song in the dialogue at all, songs are in the stage scenes. It's very partitioned; it's almost very weirdly partitioned: when they talk they just talk, when they sing they just sing. The songs should complement on the emotion of the talky scenes that happened before. That was my favorite musical, but it's not exactly a real traditional musical.

In terms of filmmaker aspect of *Perhaps Love*, I would be influenced by *Day for Night* [François Truffaut, 1973] and *Eight and a Half* [Federico Fellini, 1963], which are about filmmaking. The truth in fact is that part actually came from an idea I had a couple years ago to recreate the situation of my first movie with John Woo [*Heroes Shed No Tears*]. It was the funniest experience I've ever had on a film set. We shot for four months in the jungle in Thailand, with two French, three Korean, a whole bunch of HK crew, a Thai crew, a Japanese cinematographer -- five nationalities, all speaking different languages. Every actors just spoke their own language in the dialogue, and we just dub them. Nobody knew what the others were talking about.

John Woo was in the lowest of his career and he was very emotional, he is a very passionate person, which makes his film even more dramatic. It would be a perfect movie within the movie of *Day for Night* [Ed.: which tells the story of a shooting of a film, *May I introduce Pamela*]. If you use the shooting of *Heroes Shed no Tears* for *Day for Night*, it would be a much more interesting movie than *Day for Night*, or *Eight and a Half* [Ed.: the story of a director who retreats into his dreams]. I always wanted to remake that movie. I thought of a black comedy/drama in a way. But it's very hard to put such a film together. So this idea influenced *Perhaps Love*, with the shooting on the film set and the inner turmoil of the director.

I.3. Love isn't invincible

I.3.1. Romantic stories

Does the movie portray the perfect love story for you? What would be a perfect love story?

No. Do you think it's perfect? All the titles of my loves story are imperfect, like *Comrade*,

Almost a Love Story and **Perhaps** Love. There is always a question mark, “almost” or “perhaps.” To me, I’ve never counted on finding the perfect love. A lot of people call me a very romantic director and I make romances. But for me that’s a joke, because my movies are never romantic, because my movies are very old prospects about people. My movies are about people being selfish.

There is a fundamental difference between traditional love stories and contemporary one. Traditional ones are all about external factors and obstacles that stop you from loving the loved one. In *Titanic*, the ship is sinking. In *Romeo and Juliet*, two families are fighting. In *The Butterflies Lovers*, because women cannot go to school one has to pretend to be a boy. All those tragic love stories are based on external obstacles. But in the world today, we have no external obstacles. Why a partner leaves another, it’s because they don’t love each other enough. Because love is not invincible. If love was invincible, like the way it’s portrayed in traditional love stories, we wouldn’t have any problems. Now we don’t have obstacles; I don’t even need to make a love story, because everybody is in love and happily married. There is no story to be made. So I think in a contemporary love story, you’re really going back and discussing all the romantic love stories, because love is not invincible. It’s very fragile.

When I was doing *Comrades*, I had a very good conversation with Maggie Cheung who said that in any relationship, if one walks away from another, there is not other reason but he or she doesn’t love her or him enough. It’s a very scary though for someone to be so in love, like Takeshi [in *Perhaps Love*] to realize that she [Zhou Xun] doesn’t love him enough. Or worse, she doesn’t love him, period. *She loves money or she loves something more than she loves me*. That’s like all contemporary love stories. Contemporary love stories are always about one loving more than the other. And even technically that is not romantic, if you want to think of a bitter approach of life. You could actually write a movie about bad people. Because if they walk away, they’re bad.

I.3.2. Women walking away

In *Perhaps Love*, we can consider Zhou Xun’s character as a not very likeable character, she uses others, she is very career-minded and an alcoholic. But looking at the way you portray your characters in all your movies, we can feel you love them.

It’s a personal thing. I think women are the most attractive when they walk away. I truly love that, that’s why I make these characters. That movie [*Perhaps Love*] had very extreme responses, some people loved it and some hated it. Those who hated it looked at Zhou Xun’s character and thought she was not sympathetic --she’s not good enough. Those people were the one who used their brain to watch the movie; they used their logic and rationality. In my movies, you cannot use rationality otherwise it’s not romantic. These people [the film leads] don’t love each others enough, love is not invincible, and love is not everything.

However, if you use your heart, your emotions to watch the movie, without dissecting the character, then you will go with the flow. That’s how I believe it.

A journalist raised a question yesterday: “Actually you didn’t talk about Zhou Xun at all in the movie.” Yes, because the only lead is Takeshi. It’s his movie; it’s his quest to find out whether or not this woman loves him. His whole life is about this woman.

Zhou Xun's character is his vision of this woman, just like my vision of a woman.

Zhou [the actress] was my obstacle to make the movie exactly as I wanted it to be, because Zhou is the total opposite of her character Sun. For Zhou, it's love above all. Love is more important than money or career or being an actress. So it's a fundamental difference. I think Zhou played this character much more to the liking of the public than I would have done it if it wasn't for Zhou. Look at Maggie Cheung [who plays Li Chiao] in *Comrades*. The film gives her actually a lot more excuses, because of the time, because of poverty, because of a lot of stuff. Her character is more likeable.

All my movies are about women that leave, and when people say that I actually don't show who Zhou is, I usually reply to them "I don't know who these women are when they leave." It's a movie about a man who's suffering because he's lost his love. We don't know why this woman walks away. And this whole movie is a quest for Takeshi to find out why she left and who she is and who she was.

The answer to your question will be because the director finds these women very attractive, because I don't find they're bad because they walk away. Maybe that's the reason why they are not likeable characters, and yet I make them likeable.

I.4. Chinese films evolving

I.4.1. Autobiographical film, or not

Jacky Cheung reportedly said the movie was quite autobiographical for you.

Everybody keeps saying it's autobiographical because his character is a director, and I am a director, of course it sounds biographical. I think there is a nothing autobiographical. I don't have a beautiful young actress wife like the character!

Cheung's character is supposedly a mainland director. Not a HK director. It's very different. HK directors are very approachable, mainland directors are very powerful. They're officers in the party, high ranked people. They are very official, because in the party everything is official. Directors in the studio system are also ranked, class-1 directors, class-2 directors, etc. They are like bosses.

In HK, directors aren't bosses. Mainland directors have more stature in the industry. That's why the audience will follow directors more than they follow stars. Not literally in term of following but in terms of box office, directors mean more than stars. In HK, stars mean much more than directors!

This movie is about a changing climate. China has been in a social and economical reform for the last twenty years. But the film sector only started to reform two years ago [2003]. So that's the last sector to be reformed. I think mainland directors are dealing with a lot of crisis. All of a sudden, the director in the movie has to deal with a HK star. It's like: "HK actors? Give me a break. In HK, they have stars and they don't have actors." Now a mainland director has to use

a star and try to make him an actor. It's really the dilemma for mainland directors.

However, *Perhaps Love* is autobiographical, because we, HK filmmakers, definitely need a bigger market for HK films. So the director in the film, and myself, are going through the same thing -- we need the movie to be bigger. So yes, I am going through a crisis, but it's not prototypical of an HK director, it's prototypical of a mainland director, including this relationship with this young actress wife. I don't remember a single HK director with a young actress wife. I know a dozen of my mainland friends who have young actress wives; every one, the big and small directors, the very famous and not so famous ones. Everyone has a young actress wife.

With the emotion and the sentiment I put into this film this is my most personal film to date.

I.4.2. Censors

Can co-productions like this one, between Shanghai and HK, be a solution to the current crisis of the Hong-Kong film industry? Can it help set an example for potential developments of the Chinese cinema industry as a whole?

Some of the solutions I've tried for a few years were working with fellow Asian filmmakers, and that was my way of coping with the fact I still wasn't conformable with the mainland censorship. Now it's more and more relaxed. Even a film like *Perhaps Love*, would have been difficult a few years ago. Look at *Comrades*, everybody enjoyed the film, even the party officials, they all liked the movie. Even the older party officials have seen the movie. But the film was banned in China. It was sensitive because it portrayed mainland Chinese leaving, going to HK. But there was nothing political with the movie, I didn't even write about the June 4th, 1989 issue [Ed.: The Tiananmen Square massacre]. That wasn't a part of the movie, but the film was still not uncensored. The thing is I was very nervous about how censors would affect contemporary movies.

If you've noticed, most of the co-productions are period movies. In period movies, you have no dispute. It's not about reality of life and between what is really happening on the street [of our modern cities] and what is portrayed on the big screen, there is a big difference.

But that has changed a whole lot. Maybe not enough, because there isn't a rating system, there is no PG or whatever. Which means you cannot make horror films, you cannot make scary movies, or violent movies. There are a lot of talks about it, but it still hasn't happened, and it doesn't look like it's going to happen soon.

The HK filmmakers know from day one that unless you extend your film influence outside HK, HK should not have the right to make movies for the 6 millions people [living in HK]. There are just not enough people to watch movies to justify an investment. [In the past] HK was benefiting from the fact it was the Chinese filmmaking capital for Chinese overseas all over the world. But that has stopped. In the last five-ten years, it's gone. It's totally gone. Right now, our biggest hope is China, which has still a certain amount of censorship going on, even though [things are] better.

So I was working with Asian filmmakers. Are those really HK movies? They are not really HK movies. But even *Perhaps Love* isn't a traditional HK movie. But it doesn't matter; I still think that the spirit of HK filmmakers is very much evident inside *Perhaps Love*. Even though the story is about the mainland. But the approach is very specific because I am from HK. If I were from mainland, I think the story would have been very different.

I.5. Chan's production companies

I.5.1. Applause Pictures

You co-founded Applause Pictures in 2000 with Teddy Chen and Allen Fung to work with other Asian filmmakers.

Yes, that was a vital reason. And also, the ambition was that we could think down the road of doing something that people don't usually do. It's just to show people that anything could be done, because if we don't try every different ways, even if we fail, the HK film industry would shrink, shrink, shrink.

It was to experiment new ways. I am not saying that an Asian film would be like the only thing that can be done, because as you know with language problems and culture problems, an Asia film would always be a niche. And make a niche movie is difficult you know in an industry. The more you try, the more examples you get, you actually teach yourself more ways of survival. Look at *The Eye* or *Three* [Ed.: an omnibus movie directed by three Asian directors] for instance. You know how many horror movies started after *Three*? A lot. And that was when people thought that horror movies wouldn't work. We probably didn't make a lot of money with *Three*, but we survived, we recouped our investment. And we put three directors together, and we introduce foreign directors to local territories. At least maybe the horror film genre will last two or three years. It will go around. It will come back and then go. But at least we thought of something for the market to stop it from dying.

I.5.2. The UFO years

What is the difference between UFO (United Filmmakers Organization) and Applause?

UFO is essentially a totally HK-centric company, because UFO was founded in the last days of the HK Golden Days in the early 1990s. That was back in the time we didn't have to think about foreigners. That was a time when HK was like Hollywood now, where you make film for HK people, and the rest would just watch. Because all of Asia is very familiar with the HK background. It's like, we are not New Yorkers but we watch movies made in NY and LA, because we are very familiar with that background and that set of actors.

Tom Cruise is loved by Chinese; you don't feel he's a foreigner. Because Americans aren't foreigners any more. So HK, back in the 1980s and 1990s wasn't foreign to the rest of Asia. Back in those days we could make a movie that would work in HK. If it worked in HK, it would work everywhere else. So we only had very focused projects.

I just really needed to walk down Tsim Sha Tsui [Ed.: a HK district in the Kowloon side in the mainland, opposite the HK island] and I knew what movie I could make. If I saw somebody

doing something at a bus stop, that inspired me to make a movie and people in Korea, Japan or Thailand would watch it.

But today, I cannot walk down Tsim Sha Tsui and find inspiration. Because what happens in Tsim Sha Tsui is irrelevant to the rest of the world. So today at Applause, we have to think of so many things, I have to flight to everywhere. It's very tiring, half of the time you're finding inspiration and half of the time you are busy making deals, to make sure that these films could be exported before you make them.

That's the difference between Applause and UFO.

Is UFO still in activity?

UFO comprised first of three, then five, then six people: filmmakers, writers, directors and producers. By 1996, when I wrapped *Comrades*, I knew that the HK film industry was coming to an end, and we couldn't deny it. The whole industry stopped in 1997 -- that was the bottom line.

All the professional investors, long time film investors, like Golden Harvest, Golden Princess that financed Cinema City, or D&B, all those studios closed down. Shaw Brothers even closed down earlier, in the mid 1980s. So Golden Harvest began to be a distribution company. They don't produce movies anymore; they instead ask you to make movies to supply them. So we knew from that day on the HK film entertainment industry was replaced by videos, by mostly videos and music.

Producers want to buy videos from the Golden Harvest or Cinema City [catalogues]. But now, these companies don't make movies, so what are they going to do with their videos? They've got to invest money to make movies. They put money to make big movies, with the idea they can benefit from the video distribution. These people have a very small mind --they've a video mind. Even Stephen Chow's movie *Shaolin Soccer* is financed by Universe [Ed.: a major DVD/VCD distributor from HK]. The bottom line for them is video. No matter how big the movie is, they only think about video exploitation. And video is like bucks to us filmmakers. Videos are the most stable source of returns, of recoupment for film investors. You cannot do without it because it's the only stable source of revenues. So we need that money to make movies. At the same time, video is the movie biggest enemy. You cannot live without it but you'll die eventually with it. So it has become a very unhealthy situation. When I decided to leave, I didn't decide to go to the US, I only decided to take a break and observe and see what was gonna happen before I jumped back to HK.

I was in L.A., I decided to make a film with DreamWorks [*The Love Letter*] and then I came back to HK to Applause. But when I left a year after *Comrades*, Lee Chi Ngai, my partner in UFO, left to go to Japan to do a movie, *Sleepless Town* with Takeshi Kaneshiro. When both of us left, there was still Jacob Cheung in UFO, who eventually left a year later. And then Jane the writer left, Chen left.

What was left of UFO was just the administration and Eric Tsang the producer. The label is still there because they didn't want to get rid of the label, but all the creative elements left. So technically UFO isn't closed down, but the people who have made UFO are all gone.

I.6. More Hongkonger than Hongkongers

Now that HK has been handed over to China, how do you consider yourself? A Chinese, Hongkongese or a Chinese immigrant?

I consider myself as from HK. Always. And the reason is because I've been taken away from HK when I was eleven. And I think that make me even more Hongkongese. The more you are taken away from your birthplace, the more loyal to your birthplace you become. I am more loyal than anyone born and raised in HK. I always compare it to the HK roast pork, a local delicacy. To a HK person, all you need to do is to pick up the phone, and you get the dish deliver to you in five minutes, or you take an elevator down your building and you can get it in five minutes. I've to wait a year to eat it when I was younger [and in Thailand]. Us, people who've been uprooted and taken away and have migrated at a very young age, are actually more nostalgic or more HK than HK people.

The reason why I was taken away was also one of my unconscious reasons for making *Comrades*. Chinese have just been moving from places to places for the last couple of hundreds years. China was poor, overpopulated, there was not enough to stay around. My grandparents went to Thailand at a very young age at the turn of the century. Before WWII. And my parents were born in Thailand; my father was actually born in China, but taken as an infant to Thailand and came back during the Sino-Japanese war, and when China was engage in the war, he went back to Thailand. My father moved out quite a bit as a child, but grew up in Thailand.

But the problem is Chinese, as opposed to Europeans born in America, if they never learn to embrace their new home, they always look back. It's a big Chinese ego thing. For Europeans, they keep their heritage but they embrace their new home, they embrace America. It's very rare for Chinese. All Chinese mostly from Southeast Asia, southern Chinese and Cantonese went to America. But my parents had two children and went to Thailand. And then they always looked back. My dad refused to learn Thai. They grew up in Thailand, but spoke Chinese all their life and when they grew up, it was the late 1940s early 1950s, it was the new China. Everybody had hope about what the new China represented. It was a very good time. And only the best young people get to go back to China, a whole generation of *crème de la crème*, just like now when Chinese kids go to American schools.

In 1951, there was a ship every month from Thailand to China. It's a theme for a movie I really want to make, and I've been trying to make for the last five years. A whole generation came back to China. When they were back, they realized it was a very big rude awakening, not because of the political situation. The situation was actually quite good in the 1950s. It's because they knew they didn't speak perfect Chinese, even though they didn't speak Thai, but their Chinese was heavily accented. And to the mainlanders they spoke weird Chinese. They couldn't stand the cold weather, their skin was probably a bit tanner than most Chinese and they ate hot spicy food. So it took them a whole life to realize they were not what they were told they were. They were told they were not Chinese, and were even looked down by Thai who told them they were Chinese.

My parents were the most fortunate generation that left before the Cultural Revolution. That's

why I was born in HK. The only exit door from China was HK. So when they came to HK, they decide to stay because they couldn't go back to Thailand. Because anyone who'd leave any civilized country in the 1950s to go to China, or any other communist country, would be chopped. So they couldn't go back to their home. So a lot of families were actually separated for over thirty years because of one decision to go back to what they thought was home. That's why I became HKese. And when I grew up, they kept telling me I was Thai, because they were born in Thailand. Now, it takes some double efforts to accept the fact that they are Chinese but also they are Thai Chinese. They try to go back to their roots, where they were born, which is Thailand. I refuse the fact that I am Thai, because we are Chinese and more importantly I am HKese.

I didn't know what I was. And I was uprooted when I was eleven, to move with them back to Thailand. I had a lot of growing up problems because I didn't think I should be there, so I left Thailand as soon as I could, when I was 18. I always wanted to make movies and that was the period of the HK new wave directors, so HK was everything. I didn't want to be in Hollywood, I wanted to be in HK! In 1983 when I came back from shooting the movie with John Woo [*Heroes Shed No Tears*], I didn't want to come back to college!

I.7. Explanation not needed

What advice would you get to westerners to better understand Chinese movies?

You know what, all my life I've tried to make movies that don't need advice to be understood! I hope *Perhaps Love* is one of them. Actually perhaps the biggest compliment that I got for *Perhaps Love* was during the Academy screening [Ed.: probably for the selection to the Academy Award nomination in the Best Foreign Language film category], one guy came up to me and said "half way through the film I forgot I was actually reading subtitles."

In my whole life I hope I can just make a movie, and not a *Chinese* movie. Because it could be a Chinese movie but you don't have to put an adjective before it. Not because I want to go international, it's really not the case. It's the case of when can we, Chinese filmmakers, make movies like Tom Cruise makes movies, and then the whole world takes it for granted.

First our themes need to be universal. Secondly I believe that, because I am a city folk, I cannot make 'universal universal,' I can only make 'city universal.' When I watched *When Harry Meets Sally*, I didn't think the film was in New York; I was looking at Chow Yun Fat and Maggie Cheung in HK. In my mind I wasn't looking at Billy Crystal and Meg Ryan. So if we can do the same thing with Hollywood movies why can't we do the same think with my movies. Why can't you just call it a movie, why do you need to say it's a *Chinese* movie?

What do you think of the Westerner perception of Chinese movies? China filmmakers try to be more universal, but the movies aren't.

If we talk about the business side, and not the artistic side, I think in China the situation is: China needs international and international needs China. Right now, the situation in China is totally unhealthy. There are about six big movies [blockbusters] a year in average and that's it. And the first of these six movies is going to make RMB 100 millions [Ed.: roughly HKD 100 millions]. The second movie is not even going to do RMB 10 millions. So there is nothing

between 10 and 100 millions. There are only two extremes, and all the money in the industry is poured for the next year's ten or twelve movies. And you'll have ten directors working and the rest not doing anything. Because nobody's going to do a small movie because they cannot even do six millions. Look at some of the movies this year. Two Andy Lau's movies [Ed.: *Wait 'Til You're Older*, *All About Love*] and *Everlasting Regret* barely made 6-8 millions together. *Everlasting Regret* [Ed.: released on Sept 30th, 2005] made RMB 3 millions! It's ridiculous that in a big country like this nobody would go to the movie, because they think these movies are not big movies. The minute it's not a big movie, nobody go to see them.

The problem is even worse if the film makes RMB 100 million like *The Myth*. Do you think it pays for the budget of the movie and Jackie Chan's fee? The thing is China's RMB 100 millions is really not enough to make big movies. But it is some sort of insurance. 100 millions after P&A ends up with a profit of 30-35 millions. And the movie that made this earnings probably cost at least RMB 100 millions. These 30-35 millions of recoupment from China will help you, it's a kind of guarantee. That would help you to invest the rest of the 50-80 millions and then you need the international market to recoup. Which means, for any big movies, right now, you need both international and China markets. Just international is also too big a dice to roll because you don't have the guarantee in China. Yet just the China market is certainly not enough.

You have *The Promise*, *Hero*, *Seven Swords*, *House Of Flying Daggers*... The reason why they have the Chinese audience attention is that they have enough budget and the budget comes from international investments. But the reason they are going international is because they have a minimum earning guarantee from local territories. So we cannot separate one part from another.

Are these movies healthy? I don't think so, because all the movies are from the same genre: period movies, martial art, action, special effects. A part from that the Chinese audience will not believe in any other movies outside these genres. And I think that's quite unhealthy. If they don't think the movie's big, the audience will turn toward legitimate or pirate DVD. They won't go to the theatres, and also because the ticket price is relatively too high in China compared to the monthly average local salary. In HK, the average salary is HKD10, 000/month and our ticket costs HKD50. Here the average salary is HKD 2,000 and the ticket price is 50-80, it's even more than in HK! [Ed.: as of early 2006. In 2007-20008, inflation has made the matter worse].

II. THE WARLORDS

A year and a half after our first meeting, I decided to catch up with Peter Chan way ahead the mainland release of his new film, the USD 40 million production *The Warlords* (or Tau Ming Chong). That was on 13/12/2007. We met in the Shanghai Regent Hotel café in mid-August 2007 away from any promotion hassle. We picked up where we had left and started by assessing the reception of *Perhaps Love* before discussing the complexity of *The Warlords* and we finished on the evolution of the US cinema.

II.1. In Retrospect

Thomas Podvin: In retrospect, what's you take on the success of *Perhaps Love*. If you had to change anything what would it be?

Peter Chan: I always discuss films in two aspects. One is a very personal level of a piece of work from a director. Some people call it art. It very much on a personal level of a creator making something that is close to his heart. To make a movie involves a large amount of money, so you have to discuss it on a commercial level too. It is mostly what I discuss when I talk with people on interviews. Art cannot be discussed. It's very personal and there is nothing to talk about really. So you discuss really about what you love and the industry and the market and the world.

Perhaps Love was an immensely personal project to me. The more I look at it and the more I realize it, even though it's the biggest budget for a Chinese movie that I ever directed. Except *The Warlords*. So it seems that I was locked in a lot of commercial calculations, musical, dances, cast, actors and stars.

The truth is that it's in fact my most personal film in term of stories. It's actually raw in its appeal. It is very hard to look at it and say "would I have done something better?" Because I resorted to a lot of very personal experiences that I normally wouldn't have put in a movie. The reason is I was really having a hard time juggling between a personal story versus a very calculated package. And also the most important thing I had to deal with, the aspect of musical, which is not easy because it clashed with the kind of subtleties usually present in my movies. It clashes with the finer relationship or more macro magnification of all the details of falling in love or falling out of love and all that.

The fact it was a musical was a very commercial decision, it was an easy catching element, but in the same time it was something that I thought would elevate the emotion. When I was making it I was actually having a hard time trying to make those two coexist. At the end, I resorted to some very personal touches that I really wouldn't share. Those touches made the movie. At the day's end, when I look at it I cannot be objective. I really have no regrets. It was really my most personal film, so when I looked at it I was actually very very surprised and

pleased that I've actually done something like that.

So on a director's level, on an artistic level and on a personal level I have no regret and no complaint at all. On a world's packaging and on a marketing level, there are a lot of things that could have been done better.

I was thrilled and over the moon by this Newsweek piece of article by Bryan Walsh² about the fact that the film has finally broke out of the two "ghettos," that is the two extremes of the Chinese molds, the two pigeonholes. One is art films and the other is kung fu movies. So this piece says this is the first Chinese film that actually could breaks out of those molds and we don't need to be looked at as very *peculiar* Chinese people but *interesting* Chinese people because we are making a contemporary world story that anybody can relate to.

That was the goal of my life, but in retrospect because of the way the film was pushed and marketed there were a lot of places that normally a film like this couldn't go. It has a wide released in Japan, a pretty good release in France but we still didn't get any US domestic distribution. Even at a limited level.

We still didn't get a lot of things that we should have got. Not because of the quality of the film, but simply because it's Chinese and it's not in the two ghettos. As much as Walsh has written about it we still haven't broken out of these two ghettos. And now I am moving back into one of the ghetto [Ed.: with *The Warlords*, which as of now hasn't any release deal with a US distributor, despite being a Jet Li's film]. If you look at the film, now I am a little bit wiser. I know how to tackle that game. Ok I am Chinese. Now what can you say? It is very secure and safe in one of these ghettos. If you look at *The Warlords*, it has no kung fu in it whatsoever, Jet Li probably fought for a little bit in it, but he cried more in the film.

II.2. Wuxia or not wuxia

II.2.1. Making Jet Li cries

It's good to say that in advance, because most people will be expecting a wu xia pian and they might be disappointed when they see the film.

I don't know whether it's better to talk about this in advance or it's better they find out by themselves. Because if you tell them in advance, we just over-paid Jet Li! We paid Jet Li to see a kung fu actor. I am just saying that Jet Li is Jet Li because of the fans that come to see his kung fu. He's worth that much because of the fans. It's not that he doesn't fight in the film, but he is not fighting more than he is acting. He's acting a lot more than he's fighting. We have about 30 minutes of action sequences in the film. In a 2h10 movie. It is not an hour

² Chan refers to Bryan Walsh's article "Absolute Love," from Dec. 11, 2005 in Time magazine.

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,501051219-1139863,00.html>

Excerpt: "And while Perhaps Love has an Asian feel, its production values match those of any international film. The result is dazzling proof that Chinese cinema will no longer be confined to the twin ghettos of martial arts and art house."

fighting, but it is fighting without superhuman power. It's real, no wire, no flying, no jumping. It's very real and authentic. I think it's more real than even *Gladiator*. Even *Gladiator* looked real from a Chinese perspective.

II.2.2. Violence

You mean *The Warlords* looks real, like visually real or the violence looks real?

The violence is also very real. It's quite violent. I am not a very manipulative director, I do manipulate on emotion, but not on violence. In China, we distinguish 'hot weapons' [re bing qi 热兵器], firearms, from 'cold weapons' [leng bing qi 冷兵器], knives and swords. In the middle of *The Warlord*, there is a nineteen-minute battle sequence that is the cold weapon answer to *Saving Private Ryan*'s Normandy beach scene, which is the quintessential 'hot weapon' scene in terms of realistic portrayal of war. This kind of very graphic style that gives real sensations of a battlefield is what the action in my film is all about. It's not like I just want to show the violence because it's great to see blood. I would not shoot a pool of guts coming out of someone like Spielberg did. I thought that even that was too much. *The Warlords* is not gory and it's not like unnecessary [violence].

I guess there are also some concerns with the censorship in China for very violent movies.

That has always been a concern but I really don't make things that way. I think you chose the subject matter and you know it's violent so you just go and make it. The thing is there are heads being chopped off, there are knives shoved and stuck between the ribs. And there is the shot I've always talked about even before I shoot the movie; the camera needs to be one of the fighters. So the camera needs to constantly be moving, and we should feel that the cameraman would get shot at anytime. It's like war journalism.

It's like a subjective camera.

A very subjective camera. And it feels like the cameraman could die anytime and the camera should be running behind comrades, and then a spear should not come in your face but come from out of your friend back to your face. Then the spear is pulled and got stuck in, that kind of stuff. And you should hear the bones cracking. That's what it should be. If we are not selling kung fu or martial art, on a selling level, you could say that this kind of very graphic real sensation that you feel in a battle field is what this film's action is about.

II.3. Censoring

You're not in favor of self-censorship but if the release the film in the mainland is compromised, are you willing to cut anything?

We have to. There is nothing you can do. Right now we are not close to censorship yet [ED.: the interview was made before the film got the green light for a mainland release], but I personally believe that censorship has flexibility in China. They look at how things end up or what is the objective. It is actually less black and white here than HK. In HK, they look at it by the book. Ok, this much blood and that much blood is unacceptable.

Here they look at the context and judge by the context which sometimes can be subjectively interpreted. In my experience, in China I was always surprised when things get through censorship.

Sometimes you get away with things because they look at the whole context. I've just look picture a couple of days ago. I showed it to people from China Film and they all seemed to think that it's not the kind of violence that can be banned. I have never shot a pool of guts because I want to shoot a pool of guts. It's not like I just want to show the violence because it's great to see blood. That's the point.

It's safer also because the film is set in the Qing dynasty period and is not contemporary.

Yes, of course, it's one dynasty that everybody could trash. Different dynasties have different symbolism, or relationship to the present government, so you dare not talk about them. But the Qing, it's okay because it's like nobody likes the Qing Dynasty. I mean that dynasty was obviously very corrupted.

So you can blame anything on them.

Shouldn't be a problem. (Laugh).

II.4. Visuals and action

II.4.1. High contrast

Let's talk about visuals. What instructions did you give to director of photography Arthur Wong?

I wanted the film to be in very high contrast. I wanted the film to be very frightening to the eye, very harsh. I wanted to feel the burning sun, that it's actually uncomfortable. I wanted the audience to feel the discomfort that the characters feel. So it needs to be very hot and have very high contrast. And we chose a digital color correction of what we called a hot copper tone. It's not exactly cold and yellow, but it makes everything like that. We decreased the color of the first two thirds of the film. We also used a lot of half shutter. We open the shutter to 90 degree or even more.

It's a technique Spielberg used in *Saving Private Ryan*, didn't he?

He used it. And I also used it in *Three (Going Home)*. When Leon got arrested. So we used a lot of that. Very little slow motion/high speed. And everything seems very real.

II.4.2. A flexible kung fu

As for action design, there is not fantasy kung fu inside, just real fighting. But you used action choreographer Ching Siu Tung, most famous for his fantasy swordplay films. Why?

Yes, when we think of him we think he is the master of unreal, of wires. But, who else? You could name Yuen Woo Ping, but he could shoot only one on one fights. Yuen Woo Ping

doesn't like to shoot more than one on one fight. So who can we go to? You can go to Yuen Kwai, who is also a very good friend of mine. The only thing we could do is to find someone who is the most flexible person in HK. We decided on Ching Siu Tung, because he doesn't just do wired works. Even if Ching is not an expert of this kind of film nobody is.

And the rumor has that Jet Li will only work with three choreographers: Ching, Yuen Kwai or Yuen Woo Ping. So he only works with the best. Other choreographers they will be scared in front of Jet because Jet knows so much about action. That is very hard for a very young up and coming action director to approach him. And there is really no young up and coming guy around anyway.

Still, there is Sammo Hung Kwam Bo or Lau Kar Leung.

I am just hearing rumors [regarding Jet Li's preference]. But anyway, all I am saying is that I thought Ching was the one who had the most flexibility, because he changes all the time, he could adapt to whatever the director wants and gives him the best. He is willing to explore new ideas. Chinese are not very good at changing. Whatever they are good at they stay put. And action people are even more like that. So I thought Ching Siu Tung was the most flexible.

We can say it is your first action film. So what do you think of this genre?

It's not easy. Making it was difficult because there were a lot of uncertainties in my part. For action, I cannot constantly tell people exactly what I want with a lot of confidence. I can describe you roughly what I want, but I can't do it and cannot tell you how to do it. Whereas in drama films, I can tell you exactly what I want. And if anybody says I don't know what it is I can explain exactly what it is.

In action, all I can say to Ching is what I told you, and wait until he shows me something to say "no that's not right, we got to redo it." By the time you say that's not right, it's three days later and half a million dollars later. So it is not easy.

I was lucky that we got through this rather painlessly. But it could have been a disaster. Ching can show you some action that you can greatly dislike. And then you try to tell him how to do but you don't know how. You only know what you want but you don't know how to do it.

So it is not easy. Unless, you make the kind of action film where you can actually go to a DVD shop, point to a film and say I want it exactly like that. But I can't because there is nothing that has been made like that.

So Ching came up with different options, and you had to choose.

Yes.

II.5. Love fetish

In *The Warlords*, Xu Jinglei's character causes the fall of the brothers. It's recurrent in your films to have a woman messing up with the world of men.

I didn't put this in because it's recurrent in my films, but because it is really in Chang Cheh's movie [Ed.: *The Blood Brothers*, 刺馬, *Chik Ma*, which inspired *The Warlords*] and really in

the historical facts. But funny enough, that is not what attracted me to Chang's movie. I did not make this movie because I remember that love triangle in his movie. Even though it resembles most or my other movies that part to me was very typical in Chinese period pieces. A woman's extramarital relationship with a man always means sex and not love. What I've tried to do here was to make it look like a bit more than just an affair.

You know that Jet Li will never be convinced to make a sex scene. Jet Li is not the kind of man to believe in that kind of hunger, when a man tears the cloths off, etc. It doesn't work. So I actually made it very much more about a certain kind of fetish. Not sexual fetish but love fetish. Like the woman is obsessed with intellectuals, with literacy. She lives in a world where all the men in her life are illiterate. Andy's and Takeshi's characters are. When she was young she was taken from her home, sold to Yangzhou, to be what they called Yangzhou peonies. A Yangzhou brothel was a sort of big geisha house, but there were not really geishas. They buy young girls from the small villages and train them to be courtesans, concubines or prostitutes. Prostitutes in old China were of a very high standing. They all read, write and sing, play flute and harp.

Xu was just about to be sold of when she was 16. Her childhood sweetheart from her village, Andy Lau, came and rescued her. He killed 8 -10 men when he was barely 18. And the two of them fled into the mountains and became bandits. These are all back stories we don't see in the movie. And then, when Jet came along, he was the first literate man she ever saw. Andy thought she loved him because they were childhood sweetheart and he rescued her when she was 16. But to her, her life ended when she was 16.

During the 4-5 years she spent training in Yangzhou she got obsessed with a better life. Which is very normal for women today. It's actually very normal for human being. But in period Chinese literature we don't talk about human nature. They always think that these things are immoral. Most of the Chinese heroes and heroines would never react like that. I am actually trying to portray a very contemporary woman who loves nice cloths, nice jewelry, and she just got stopped because her childhood friend just stopped her. She was being put down as a prostitute but she wanted to be in that world. So when she met Jet years later, she felt in love with him.

So there is no sex scene between them too.

There is a scene when they finally give in to their passion and suppression and make love in the trenches. There was a long 40-minute sequence of war in the trenches. That was my favorite part of the film, where all hell breaks loose. It's all in a very quiet western setting in the trenches, where the young kids are all rotting in a very claustrophobic war, where all you do is wait and rot to death and don't fight.

II.6. Movie business

What happened to the Applause pictures company?

Applause Pictures is still around. We still do the low budget movies, because Applause doesn't usually afford big budget movies. The Morgan and Chan company is just an entity for collaboration between projects that is between myself and Andre Morgan, which is really

between Ruddy Morgan and Applause, basically. Ruddy Morgan would do American movies, Morgan and Chan is the Ruddy Morgan joint venture with Applause. At Applause we do smaller budget or medium budget Asian movies or Chinese movies. And Morgan and Chan will do bigger budgets with Ruddy Morgan. So Applause can be in co-production with other companies with bigger budget movies.

Perhaps Love is like a HK film. How do you consider *The Warlords*?

Perhaps Love is made a by HK filmmaker, I really cannot say it's a HK film, because it's about China. It's really about mainland China.

HK audience seemed to be a bit intimidated by the film because it's not about HK. And the actress [Zhou Xun] is not from HK, the actor [Takeshi Kaneshiro] is from Taiwan. The real HK actor [Jacky Cheung] plays a HK director. This is all a bit confusing. It's really more like a mainland movie for HK people, because it has to do with the contemporary Chinese world.

For *The Warlords*, it's a little bit easier for HK audience because when it's a period film they don't get the HK/mainland separation. When it's a contemporary film, they do take the location very seriously.

II.7. Event movies

Blood Brother (2008) director Alexi Tan told me a big cast will guarantee a box office success in China. Is it still the same in HK, or has it evolved?

Big cast anywhere in the world will guarantee a box office success. Movies today have become more and more like a gamble. Going to theatres is not the only way to see a movie. I grew up in a world where 100% of the audience sees the movies in cinemas. And then it became 70%, 50 % with VHS and TV. Now with download and DVD, I think only 20% of people that ever saw my films saw it in theatres. Or maybe even less. But the money that really matters to the film or the survival of the investment is coming from theatrical releases, at least 60-70%. The problem is we got 80% of people who would pay for less than 30% of our production budget. So it is a very unhealthy situation, until that situation improves and we can take the recoument from all the ancillaries. And money is just one part of it.

The kind of impact and satisfaction and response from the audience is now still based on theatricals. So the only thing you can do today is to transform all the movies into event movies. They make a big film with a lot of stars that the audience needs to see immediately, otherwise they wait six months, two years and eventually find it on the cable channels. Which means that, not just movie stars, but people have become hysterical in term of making a movie attractive enough for a theatrical release. This is a very unhealthy situation China's been facing for the last five years with all the big movies.

You've got to understand that we thought it was a specific Chinese problem. But that's not true. Look at Hollywood this year. Between *Spiderman 3*, *Pirates 3*, *Transformers* and *Harry Potter 4*, those four movies are all blockbusters. Some of those broke all time records. They broke records like *Gone With the Wind* did at the time. I am telling you the cinema experience in the world has changed; people today go to the movie theaters to be overwhelmed, not by the story but by the magnitude and by how busy the frames are. Everybody trash those films,

and they are still making money. It's very typical of Chinese to trash big movies that make money. But now it's happening in Hollywood, so it's not a Chinese thing. It's all over the world. So the cinema experience or movie-going experience in the theatrical format has become Disneyland. It has become theme park wide, completely.

I think it's pathetic. Now that I have finally made the big movie I am like these blockbuster directors. But still I try to maintain my integrity and my passion in the story of the movie. Making *The Warlords* is my way of dealing with the change in the world cinema today. That's the most I can do. I can't go make *Transformers*. This is as far as I can go to bridge the gap between the contemporary world market, what the audience want with my own liking.

However, even after making the biggest movie in my career and probably the biggest budget in the last few years in China, this movie in that kind of definition is still not that commercial enough. Because if you make *Transformers*, you'd better not tell such a complicated story. You don't need characters; you just need that many people.

II.8. Art and the decline of cinema

Coming back to the discussion on art Vs commercial movies. A lot of people share your view. In the US the film is a product, maybe in France it's called art. Are there a lot of fellow filmmakers in China and HK who share your views?

I think in HK [we consider it commercial] more than in China. Because in HK, we always know the basis of survival in this industry. And if you don't survive, how can you make movies? If you don't make movies, how can you get an audience? How can you have any personal gratification as a filmmaker? So all I am saying is you've got to see the reality. I don't believe in dealing with films as real art. Because art is never defined until you die or until it's old enough to be define as art. So people tell you what you're doing is art. You don't tell yourself it is art. I don't think even the greatest painter says "I am a great artist" when he's painting. He's having fun painting and people thinks it's art.

Maybe you can call that a product of your creativity.

Yes, it is the product of our own creativity. Filmmaking is a way for me to have a go at sharing my view of the world. And if people listen it's great, if they don't, it's just my view. If you want to do filmmaking as a very expensive hobby, you need to see where the reality of the business is. Honestly, you don't need to make money for the investors. It's definitively not your job. But you can't make them lose money. If they lose money, they don't come back. You've got to go find another one. You have to break even.

We always thought it was a typical Chinese problem, and that problem would go away when China gets healthier and healthier in the development of the film sector. But now, you see that Hollywood is the same and you realize it is a global issue. And maybe my generation should understand that the day and age of our definition of cinema is over. Not that there will not have exceptions. There will always be exceptions. There is no sure death of this art form. Yet, in terms of very normal development of the word cinema, it's gone. Look at the old Hollywood films, they are great, they are very traditional. They are not very fresh but they are great. They

appeal to the human emotion.

And then in the 1960s, the French new wave takes a completely new level. Very innovative, very unorthodox and anything goes. With a complete liberty thrust into the cinema.

And in the 1970s, the Americans being Americans take that great freedom and mix it with all the mass appeal. I think the greatest American cinema, other than old Hollywood, is the cinema of the 1970s with Coppola and with a lot of young directors. These movies are all consumer friendly but they all have something to say and they are all great movies.

The 1980s got that changed. Spielberg comes at the heel of the American new wave and tried to turn it back into the studios, back in the big entertainment, theme park. Spielberg is really the one that's started what is happening today. Which is great because Spielberg's movies still provide choice.

Then on the more personal film level, in the 1980s Woody Allen was great, when he was still at his peak, and then copycats of Woody Allen appeared. Which are more commercial films like *When Harry Meets Sally*, which is still a reasonably good movie. And then it becomes more commercial like *Sleepless Night in Seattle*, more studio like romantic comedies and all that, which I didn't like. However, you have to admit that it uses a certain commonality between the audience and the characters; you're talking about your own experience, love and everything else. And there are still films like *Driving Miss Daisy* and *Out of Africa*. There are still decent movies.

And then you come to the 1990s, those films are gone. You have the blockbusters and then you have the art films coming on the heels, revolutionizing the Oscar Best Film category every year into films that are actually more independent. The driving force was probably one scene with a lot of Indies, filmmakers in New York and whatnot, and Quentin Tarrantino. But all their movies need to be so special in the subject matter, need to be so loud and out there. Like a mother killing a son, a husband killing wives. Or the way the story is told needs to be so unorthodox, meaning you tell the story backward, the middle goes back to the front and so on. Films with structures like *Pulp Fiction* or *Memento*.

There is a market that is never tampered by these changes which is the art film market or the film festival circuit, but even the film festival circuit has abundant directors like Hou Hsiao Hsien with slow movies about the difficulties of life. They slowly fade away, even at Cannes and Venice, to the benefit of very exotic and strange and horrific stories. This drives all these films to a level appealing to more than an art-house film-going audience, it transforms it into something that actually could content to the mass appeal. And that's all good.

But by 2000, even those films are gone. Arty is gone. And now what we see is only one kind of movie. I think everybody has been driven by this global economy of commercialization of everything, because the world was a lot of small worlds before. A lot of culture. In Europe particularly... you would understand. But now, the whole world has become one global culture. Even Europe is changing. China is changing so fast because China is really head over heels with America and Hollywood. So Chinese would readily drop everything they are doing and

go the American way. China is the fastest Americanizing country in the world, in terms of commercialism.

So I am telling you the whole world has become hysteria, with films hard to break even, movies have become more expensive and all consumer products become more expensive.

It keeps raising the bottom line. So when the bottom line keeps going up there is no more freedom, no more breathing space. So in a 100-minute movie everything needs to be entertaining, there is no pause, and no time to sit and relax and enjoy the film.

It's been true in HK for a few decades.

That's true; HK has always been like this. But even then, I think it's getting worse and worse. I mean I am getting to a level where it is like a pressure pot. That's why the phenomenon this summer with the four American blockbusters finally puts the nail in the coffin. And I think that maybe this art form is completely changing. It's not gonna be gone for good but it's completely changing from that direction and there is no way to turn it back.

What do you want to do next? A commercial film or a personal one?

I would take one step at a time. I don't wanna plan that far ahead. Because it's very hard and depressing to find a trend. And if I keep four big movies in the pipeline I'd rather kill myself, you know. So I enjoy making this film, but I can't keep doing this kind of film. I am doing *Waiting* next, which is very much against the tide. Maybe the reason why I can get it off the ground is because I had one big one before it. And if you don't do something like that right after this big one, you'll never get to do something like that.□