



Mad Detective, © Milkyway Image (HK) Ltd., One Hundred Years of Film Company

The Rise of Johnnie To

By Marie Jost
(February 2011)

With an addendum by Thomas Podvin
(completed in April 2011).

(Revised on 16/05/2011)

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Introduction

Johnnie To evolved from an unfamiliar face of Asian cinema in the West before 2000 to one of the world's most talked-about international filmmakers today. In the essay below, Marie Jost proposes a detailed and chronological account of the rise of Johnnie To's fame in the western world, examining how appreciation and enthusiasm for To and his films have grown in the fanboy, the critic, the film festival and the academic circles. Ms. Jost also explores how To has constructed his own persona overseas through interviews with various Western media.

As an addendum to Ms. Jost's essay and to propose a complement to the Western-centric views on Johnnie To, Thomas Podvin interviewed five scholars, critics and film fans from Hong Kong. They provided much information on the local context in which To has strived to make numerous films - commercial or personal - since the inception of his film company, Milkyway Image. They also elaborated on misunderstood or neglected aspects of his cinema, and they described how To is appreciated locally. Finally, Ms. Jost summarizes the important elements of these interviews in a conclusion.



The Mission, © Milkyway Image (HK) Ltd.

PART I

THE RISE OF JOHNNIE TO

Introduction

The rise of Johnnie To Kei-fung in the West from virtual unknown to lauded, decorated and hotly debated “auteur” filmmaker could be described in the kind of clichés that are typically used to characterize Hong Kong action films: fast, furious, unpredictable and with some totally unforeseen twists thrown in that defy Western expectations. So how did Johnnie To go from an almost unknown director in Western circles in 2000 to one of the world’s most talked about international filmmakers today? It is a tale of fanboys and cult cinema, film festivals and bitter debates waged by critics, and ultimately the embrace of Johnnie To by international film festival programmers and the academic community.

Johnnie To was making films long before 2000, the first year there was any great public recognition of him in the West. Before 1996, his work was firmly situated within the realm of commercial Hong Kong filmmaking. He was a respected director and producer known for releasing commercial genre films that, more often than not, made money and were popular with the general movie-going public. He was especially well-known for his comedies featuring the biggest stars of the day such as Chow Yun-Fat and Stephen Chow. In the two English-language “bibles” of Hong Kong film, Stephen Teo’s *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimension* (1997) and David Bordwell’s *Planet Hong Kong* (2000), Johnnie To receives only the briefest of mentions. Teo gives him a capsule bio-filmography in the back of his book and mentions To as a director of new-style “moral” comedies. The filmography ends at 1997’s *Lifeline*. Bordwell in *Planet Hong Kong* discusses 1997’s *Lifeline* as an example of one of several films released that year that celebrated the “self-sacrificing heroism displayed by peace officers” as opposed to the films that glamorized the world of the triads. Bordwell did seem to catch a glimmer of greater things in To when he mentioned Johnnie To as an innovative filmmaker within Hong Kong’s cadre system, and puts To in a list of

filmmakers that includes King Hu, Tsui Hark and Wong Kar Wai. But if Johnnie To had continued on the trajectory that Teo and Bordwell described in the late 1990s to 2000, he would not have become the darling of the international film festival circuit routinely premiering major films in recent years at the “big three” international film festivals--Venice, Berlin and Cannes--and being invested as an Officer of the National Order of Arts and Letters by the French Ministry of Culture and Communication in May 2009 at the Cannes Film Festival. Several important elements had to shift for Johnnie To to go from commercial genre filmmaker, known almost exclusively in Hong Kong circles, to one who is now highly respected by many critics and academics, is the subject of numerous international film retrospectives, and whose films and DVDs now receive domestic releases in the US, Britain, and Europe. First and foremost To made some radical career moves, initially in 1996 and then again in 1999, setting the stage for his transformation first into a cult Hong Kong filmmaker and then into an internationally lauded auteur.

Chapter 1

From Fanboy Favorite to Internationally-acclaimed Filmmaker

Milkyway Image and the Fanboys

In 1996 Johnnie To did a professional about-face and totally reinvented his career as a filmmaker. He and business and artistic partner Wai Ka-Fai founded a new, independent film production company, Milkyway Image, to promote a new approach to filmmaking and to identify and assist a new generation of filmmakers at a critical junction in Hong Kong filmmaking. The industry was in decline with the impending return of Hong Kong to China. This was compounded by the Asian economic crisis and erosion of the viability of Hong Kong cinema in the face of competition from Hollywood blockbusters. The crisis also negatively impacted Hong Kong's role as moviemaker for Southeast Asia. Furthermore, many of Hong Kong's most prominent filmmakers had left the territory to try their luck in Hollywood. Milkyway Image was founded with the intent of salvaging the Hong Kong film industry artistically and commercially. Milkyway films tended to be dark and were often violent and nihilistic. While they did manage to garner some critical acclaim, local movie audiences largely ignored them. Johnnie To was credited with directing three Milkyway Image films in 1998-99: *A Hero Never Dies*, *Running Out of Time* and *The Mission*.

It was just at this critical juncture that a group of "fanboys" in New York City decided to mount a film retrospective focusing on Milkyway Image Productions. "Contemporary Urban Cinema from Hong Kong's Milkyway Image Productions" was screened in New York September 15 - 17, 2000. The festival was a shoestring

operation mounted for US\$5,000 that showcased seven Milkyway Image films. The write-ups promoting the individual films are typical fanboy hyperbolic purple prose that, while over-the-top, do capture the heady excitement of the discovery of a whole raft of exciting new cult films from Hong Kong. *A Hero Never Dies* is described as “dark old swamp magic at its most baroque, this movie sinks its teeth into you and won’t let you go.”¹ Similarly, *The Mission* is characterized as “movie as haiku, and despite a *non-sequitir* (sic) last shot...this zen garden is meticulously arranged, raked, styled and set....the film is an icy-cool diamond of perfection.”² Minus the over-the-top language, these assessments of the individual films still hold up and would produce understanding nods from many critics and scholars ten years later.

First Years on the Festival Circuit

This was not, however, the first screening of a Johnnie To film at a Western film festival. The Udine Far East Film Festival was founded in 1998 and To’s *All About Ah-Long* was screened that year. In 1999 *A Hero Never Dies* was a popular favorite at Udine winning the Audience Award. The 2000 edition screened *The Mission* and *Running Out of Time*.

The Berlin International Film Festival showed the first of many Johnnie To pictures when it screened *The Mission*, *Where a Good Man Goes*, and *Running Out of Time* in 2000. Likewise, *The Mission* was shown at festivals in Vienna and Toronto in 2000. At Toronto it was featured in the cult “Midnight Madness” slot.

A pattern emerged of programming Milkyway Image pictures at various international film fests, most often the pictures directed by To himself. But

¹ Subway Cinema: *A Hero Never Dies* (1998), Expect the Unexpected: Contemporary Urban Cinema From Hong Kong’s Milkyway Image Productions, September 15-17, 2000 at the Anthology Film Archives, New York, <http://www.subwaycinema.com/etu2000/hero.htm>.

² Subway Cinema: *The Mission* (1999), Expect the Unexpected: Contemporary Urban Cinema From Hong Kong’s Milkyway Image Productions, September 15-17, 2000 at the Anthology Film Archives, New York, <http://www.subwaycinema.com/etu2000/mission.htm>.

looking at the offerings at Berlin, Udine and Toronto the following year, 2001, there is a startling change in the films directed by To. Three movies were shown at these festivals, *Help!!!*, *Needing You*, and *Fulltime Killer*. *Help!!!* is a black comedy, *Needing You* is a romantic comedy starring two Hong Kong Cantopop singing stars and *Fulltime Killer* is a tale of international contract killers that isn't even set primarily in Hong Kong and features a pan-Asian cast speaking a host of languages. Gone are the black crime thrillers like *A Hero Never Dies*, *The Mission* or the other nihilistic offerings from Milkyway. In their place are movies aimed squarely at the average Hong Kong cinemagoer, precisely the viewers that had stayed away from the earlier Milkyway pictures in droves. Just at the moment when the West was developing an interest in Johnnie To and his Milkyway Image releases, Johnnie To once again changed his focus as a filmmaker.

100 Years of Film: Commerce and Art

Johnnie To was invited to join the newly created Hong Kong film production company 100 Year of Film launched in 1999. To was entrusted with executive and creative responsibilities. The focus at the new company was squarely on commercial filmmaking and profits. Although Milkyway Image productions had garnered a certain cult following in Hong Kong, being nominated for numerous awards and gaining the respect of critics, the films were resounding box-office failures. The situation was so dire by the time *The Mission* was filmed in 1999 that the budget was so tight every bullet had to be counted and accounted for (this in a film with numerous shoot-outs), and there was so little film stock that there was little room for error as retakes were out of the question. To was no stranger to commercial filmmaking, having been a successful commercial filmmaker in the past, and his expertise was called upon at 100 Years of Film to get the company launched on a strong commercial footing. A two-track system of production was envisioned from the start: popular movies that would feature big stars and make good profits, which in turn would provide the capital for more

personal, even art-house films. To was very candid in a 2000 interview with Thomas Shin: “Our target for this year [2000] is good box office. With this purpose in mind, we have to follow the wishes of the audience or even pick something that has proved to work in the market...many people are dissatisfied with us or have misunderstood us. Maybe it will take some time for them to understand what we are doing.”³

Not only were filmgoers in Hong Kong potentially confused by the abrupt about-face at Milkyway Image, it is easy to imagine that programmers and filmgoers at the Western festivals were less than enthusiastic about the latest offerings coming from Milkyway after having their appetites whetted by Milkyway’s dark, nihilistic, highly stylized takes on the Hong Kong heroic bloodshed tradition. Between 2000 and 2002, Milkyway Image released eight films. Six of them were comedies featuring attractive and popular stars, including a wacky, cross-dressing Cantonese New Year’s Comedy (a genre very popular with Hong Kong audiences, but little known in the West). That left *Running Out of Time 2*, starring Ekin Chen (replacing the charismatic Andy Lau in the lead antagonist role), a rather weak sequel to the critically acclaimed and popular *Running Out of Time*, and *Fulltime Killer*, a pan-Asian crime thriller that showcased Andy Lau but was not an entirely satisfying film, to appeal to the nascent fans of To’s earlier Milkyway Image films in the West. Milkyway Image and 100 Years of Film adopted a local strategy to launch the new venture on a sound financial footing and establish a reputation among Hong Kong audiences for quality popular entertainment featuring some of the top stars in Hong Kong. Two Cantopop singing big names, megastar Andy Lau and the charming Sammi Cheng, starred, between them in six of the eight new releases. They were paired in two of the highest grossing Hong Kong films to that time, *Needing You* and *Love on a Diet*, both of which broke box-office records in Hong Kong and established Andy Lau and Sammi Cheng as the reigning king and

³ Thomas Shin, “The driving force behind Milkyway Image: Johnnie To and Wai Ka-Fai,” *Hong Kong Panorama 2000-01: The 25th Hong Kong International Film Festival* (Leisure and Cultural Services Department, 2001), 49.

queen of the Hong Kong box office. Clearly during this time Milkyway Image was not concerned with its image abroad, even though it must have been gratifying to have so many of their films selected for screening at Western film festivals during those years: *Help!!!*, Berlin 2001, Udine 2001; *Fulltime Killer*, Toronto 2001, Berlin 2002, Udine 2002; *Love on a Diet*, Udine 2002; *Fat Choi Spirit*, Udine 2002.

Even with screenings of *A Hero Never Dies*, *The Mission*, and *Fulltime Killer* at international film festivals, Johnnie To's films were mostly absent from the radar of serious critics because they were "genre" pictures. Those subscribing to the auteur theory of filmmaking were focusing on two other Hong Kong directors in these years: Wong Kar-Wai and Fruit Chan. In 2000 and 2001, the international festival stage was whole-heartedly embracing *In the Mood For Love* as the revelation of Hong Kong filmmaking, alongside the works of Fruit Chan. In list after film critic list of the best international films of 2000 and 2001, *In the Mood For Love* dominated. Clearly, Johnnie To pictures were not making that much of an impression on critics who were not already aficionados of Hong Kong genre movies.

A Fresh Look at Johnnie To: the Early Retrospectives

2001 marks the year of the first Johnnie To retrospective in the West. Concurrently two film series were screening his movies: Hong Kong Film Festival 2001 (Australia) and UCLA Film Archive, in conjunction with the Asian Film Foundation: Go Johnnie To (Los Angeles). Ten Hong Kong films were featured at the Australian festival, including four recent Johnnie To works: *The Mission*, *Needing You*, *Running Out of Time*, and *Wu Yen*. Even more significant, the UCLA film archive was slated to show seven films personally selected by the director himself. (Only six were screened, however, as *Heroic Trio*, was unavailable.) Johnnie To was also present at the Question and Answer session after the projection of *Fulltime Killer*. The other films shown at this festival included:

Lifeline, *A Hero Never Dies*, *Running Out of Time*, *The Mission*, and *Wu Yen*. Already a pattern is emerging: the focus is primarily on the action and moody noir pictures, with a nod to the comedies that were then taking Hong Kong by storm. I think it is especially important to note Johnnie To's role in positioning himself in the eyes of the West as a director of sophisticated personal reworkings of the heroic bloodshed hero genre and the suspense-thriller. Each of the films chosen by To is representative of a particular type of genre film within the Hong Kong film tradition.

Return to Noir: A Rising Star on the International Film Festival Circuit

2003 was a significant year for Johnnie To. Not only did it mark the return to an almost film noir treatment of police and triad subject matter with *PTU*, but it also saw the first of Johnnie To's highly personal film meditations that defy easy genre categorization, *Running on Karma*. *PTU* was shown at four film festivals in 2003, Berlin, Toronto, Udine and New York. *Running on Karma* played Berlin and Udine. *PTU* should satisfy the fans of the earlier Milkyway Image work like *A Hero Never Dies* and *The Mission*. Perhaps it was envisioned that the art house crowd that had so passionately embraced Wong Kar-Wai would also champion the highly personal and idiosyncratic *Running on Karma*.

But 2004 was to be the breakout year for Johnnie To in the West, with three of his pictures premiering at the three most prestigious international film festivals: *Running on Karma* (Berlin), *Throw Down* (Venice), and *Breaking News* (Cannes). In addition, four recent Johnnie To films were showcased at the 2004 Recent Films From Hong Kong series presented at the Film Society of Lincoln Center (New York): *Breaking News*, *Running on Karma*, *Throw Down*, and *PTU*. In only four short years, Johnnie To's films had gone from playing a local ad hoc fanboy film festival financed on a shoestring to being shown at one of the most

prestigious locations for film screening in New York City. Johnnie To's star was on the rise in international film circles.

The Apotheosis of Johnnie To

The definitive turning point for Johnnie To and his rising fortunes in the West came in 2005. That was the year that his latest film, *Election*, was shown in competition at Cannes. While To had shown *Breaking News* the previous year at Cannes, it had not been in competition and was screened as a midnight show. With the Cannes premier of *Election*, To moved into the rank of elite internationally recognized filmmakers. This consecration by the world's most prestigious film festival contributed to his rising profile, beyond the ranks of critics specializing in Asian and genre film, and helped him gain greater international distribution of his recent films in theaters and on DVD. Shortly after the Cannes festival, the American Cinematheque in Los Angeles celebrated a five-film retrospective, Hong Kong Hero: A Tribute to Johnnie To. It featured a cross-section of Johnnie To films since 1999: *The Mission*, *Running Out Of Time*, *Breaking News*, *Running on Karma* and *Help!!!*

2006 saw two new films programmed in European festivals: *Exiled* screened in competition at Venice and *Election 2* screened out-of-competition at Cannes. The following year *Mad Detective* was shown in competition at Venice and *Triangle* (a portmanteau film directed by To, Tsui Hark and Ringo Lam) premiered out-of-competition at Cannes. The Rotterdam Festival mounted a major retrospective of To's films, showing 19 in all.

The pace of film retrospectives dedicated to Johnnie To increased to a fever pitch in 2008. Virtually concurrently the Cinémathèque Française (French Film Archive) in Paris and Institute Lumière in Lyon mounted retrospectives on Johnnie To. From March 5 to April 14, 2008, the Cinémathèque Française showed a total of

22 titles directed by Johnnie To. In Lyon from March 7 to April 27, 2008, seven films were screened. At Berlin, *Sparrow* was shown in competition and To was a jury member at the Venice Film Festival. Furthermore, in Australia, the ACMI mounted a retrospective of 12 of To's films and the Pacific Film Archive in Berkley, California mounted another featuring nine films.

In 2009 To's latest film, *Vengeance*, was screened in competition at Cannes and on May 18, 2009, To was inducted as an officer in the National Order of Arts and Letters by the French Minister of Culture and Communication. That same year the Pusan International Film Festival presented a 10-film Johnnie To retrospective. Finally in 2010 Johnnie To was the subject of an hour-long documentary, *Johnnie Got His Gun*, by documentary filmmaker Yves Montmayeur. This documentary was making the rounds of film festivals in the last quarter of 2010.



The Sparrow, © Milkyway Image (HK) Ltd., Universe Entertainment

Chapter 2

Critical Darling

Johnnie To and the Critics

Perhaps it is mere coincidence that Johnnie To, a filmmaker initially seen as specializing in “genre” pictures and active outside of both Hollywood and the European film industries, should gain such international exposure, eventually going on to receive the highest critical accolades, precisely when the internet appeared as a major force that fundamentally changed the face of film criticism. The fanboy community was the first in the West to embrace Johnnie To as a filmmaker. It was also among the first to embrace the internet and its possibilities for disseminating information and encouraging exchange of ideas (whether through civilized discussions or flame wars) about cinema and filmmakers that had been ignored, marginalized or castigated by traditional film critics. Eventually, established critics and print media began to adopt the internet in a variety of ways to more effectively disseminate their views on film. Print publications began to place some (or all) of their content on-line. Internet-only film criticism publications made their appearance after 2000, and some have garnered considerable critical accolades over the years. Whereas the first film bloggers came from outside the ranks of vetted critics writing for established print sources, as the decade has progressed some well-known and important critics have launched blogs, and even some in academia have embraced the new media in a serious way. The internet provides the most timely way to disseminate breaking news and opinion about film. A majority of the resources necessary to write this paper came from the internet, and many of them are exclusive to the internet. The one exception to this ever increasing migration of fact and opinion to the internet has been academia. The university community

still insists on print publications as the most important and legitimate medium for sharing ideas with academic peers. Consequently, the academic community is one of the most conservative in terms of adopting internet technology for the dissemination of ideas and discussion about film. It is probable that Johnnie To would have still garnered attention in the West, even without the increasing impact of the internet on film criticism, but the internet quickly became the major avenue for promoting him as a significant new filmmaker on the international stage, an opinion that eventually was consecrated in traditional print media as well.

It can be argued that criticism in any art form is characterized by the following activities: describe, analyze, interpret and evaluate.⁴ Film historian David Bordwell defines three main platforms for critical discussion in film criticism: the review, an academic article or book and the critical essay. A review is a brief characterization of the film aimed at a broad audience who hasn't seen the film. It is defined as a type of journalism. An academic article or book of criticism offers in-depth research into one or more films and presupposes that the reader has seen the film. The critical essay, which falls between the other two types of criticism, is longer than a review, but usually more opinionated and personal than an academic article.⁵ Any critic can write on all three platforms, the lines between these formats are not absolutely rigid. I, however, will discuss academic writing on Johnnie To in a separate section because it adheres to somewhat different criteria and exhibits different motivations than reviews and critical essays.

Until very recently, there was a major distinction drawn between reviews that appeared in print media--newspapers, magazines and journals--and reviews

⁴ Monroe K. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problem in the Philosophy of Art Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1958), 74-78, referenced in David Bordwell, "In critical condition", *Observations on film art*, Wednesday, May 14, 2008, <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=2315>.

⁵ Bordwell, "In critical condition."

published on the Internet. There was a definite prejudice against any type of film criticism that appeared in an exclusively on-line format, and greatest disdain was reserved for bloggers, those who dared to review or otherwise write about films without having been subjected to the vetting process that anoints print journalists. Print publications could include everything from *Cahiers du Cinéma* and the *New York Times* to the local Daily Bugle. A lot has changed in the past decade.⁶

Today the *New York Times* and *Cahiers du Cinéma* are available in on-line editions, and some newspapers and journals make at least some of their content available for free to anyone on the Internet. There are also highly respected film journals such as *Senses of Cinema* that are strictly internet affairs. The same critics that write for print publications can now also be found writing for internet sites. Even the distinction between bloggers and “serious” critics is beginning to break down, with some academics and film critics beginning to embrace the blog format. Of course, there are still bloggers of the film enthusiast or niche cinema variety who are making their contributions, but even they are gaining some respect in more traditional critical circles, however grudgingly bestowed. The Korean print film weekly *Cine21* wanted to write about the Johnnie To films being released in 2008, but no serious critics in Korea were familiar with his work. The magazine, rather than abandon its plan to write about To’s films, turned to the bloggers who were actively engaged with *Cine21*’s on-line forum. Very knowledgeable about Johnnie To’s films, they were given space in the print version of the magazine to write about To.⁷

Johnnie To films have been reviewed in the *New York Times* by Manohla Dargis (*Election 2*), in *Variety* by Derek Elley (*Running on Karma*) and in *Time Magazine*

⁶ “Film Criticism in crisis? A New York Film Festival panel discussion hosted by *Film Comment*, September 27, 2008 at the Walter Reade Theater”, *Film Comment*, Nov/Dec 2008, <http://www.filmlinc.com/fcm/nd08/fccrisis.htm>.

⁷ “Film Criticism in crisis.”

by Richard Corliss (*Fulltime Killer*),⁸ Shelly Kraicer has reviewed and interpreted Johnnie To, both individual films and his oeuvre, on-line for chinesecinemas.org and *Senses of Cinema*.⁹ Critics as prestigious as Derek Elley and Tim Youngs have written capsule reviews for the Udine Film Festival. Charles Leary has written an analytical and interpretive essay on Johnnie To for *Senses of Cinema*, and Andrew Grossman has penned an expanded analysis of Johnnie To's career for ACMI.¹⁰ It is thus abundantly clear that Johnnie To has attracted a lot of critical attention from important film critics in the past decade.

Johnnie To's Best Films?

Curiously, though, opinions on Johnnie To's films and filmmaking are literally all over the map. Each critic identifies certain favorite films as To's finest, relegating the rest to minor efforts or even unsuccessful exercises. Even a cursory look at critical opinions on To's films finds no particular pattern among critics. Some cite *The Mission* as To's finest, while others feel it is an uninteresting film in which little to nothing transpires. Some will characterize *PTU* as To's masterpiece, while others reject it as a mostly stillborn effort. Once venturing outside the crime/noir/heroic bloodshed genre films, the breadth of opinions on individual

⁸ Manhola Dargis, "...Leads to a game of wits in a sinister underworld," *The New York Times*, April 24, 2007, <http://movies.nytimes.com/2007/04/25/movies/25tria.html?pagewanted=print>; Derek Elley, "Running on Karma", *Variety*, December 16, 2003, http://www.variety.com/index.asp?layout=print_review&reviewid=VE1117922674&categoryid=2471&query=running+on+karma; Richard Corliss, "Fulltime filmmaker", *Time*, September 3, 2001, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,172589,00.html>

⁹ Shelly Kraicer, "The Mission", <http://www.chinesecinemas.org/mission.html>; Shelly Kraicer, "Wu Yen", <http://www.chinesecinemas.org/wuyen.html>; Shelly Kraicer, "Help!!!", *Senses of Cinema*, February 2001, <http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/12/help.html>

¹⁰ Derek Elley, "Running out of time," http://www.fareastfilm.com/easyne2/LYT.aspx?Code=FEFJ&IDLYT=15535&ST=SQL&SQL=ID_Documento=1063; Derek Elley, "The Mission", http://www.fareastfilm.com/easyne2/LYT.aspx?Code=FEFJ&IDLYT=15535&ST=SQL&SQL=ID_Documento=1077; Tim Youngs, "Love on a Diet," http://www.fareastfilm.com/easyne2/LYT.aspx?Code=FEFJ&IDLYT=15535&ST=SQL&SQL=ID_Documento=79; Tim Youngs, "Running on Karma," http://www.fareastfilm.com/easyne2/LYT.aspx?Code=FEFJ&IDLYT=15535&ST=SQL&SQL=ID_Documento=523; Charles Leary, "What goes around comes around: Infernal Affairs II & III and Running on Karma," *Senses of Cinema*, January 2004, http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/04/30/infernal_affairs_ii.html; Andrew Grossman, "Johnnie To: a current appraisal," http://www.acmi.net.au/Johnnie_to_essay.htm.

films only widens. Films like *Running on Karma*, *Throw Down* and *Mad Detective* have bewildered many critics, charmed a few and infuriated still others. In many ways, these are polarizing films and force reviewers to squarely face their expectations of film. When these aforementioned films do not closely approximate what critics look to films to provide, they are faced with a dilemma: they can examine with a critical eye their own expectations and the assumptions they are based on, or they can reject these troubling films out of hand. The reviews of these three films in particular are littered with the debris of film theories dashed on the jagged rocks of movies that refuse to adhere to genre definitions or sometimes even accepted standards of narrative consistency or coherence.

It is instructive to look at two separate international critics' polls that identified noteworthy films from 2000-2009. The first poll appeared in <http://dgeneratefilms.com>.¹¹ Forty-six film professionals were asked to pick the 10 best Chinese language films of the decade. Twenty-four of those polled were Chinese and 22 were non-Chinese, representing a variety of professional affiliations: 12 were university professors, 11 were critics, 11 were filmmakers/directors, five were scholars, five were film series/film festival programmers, one was an editor, while one critic's professional affiliation was not listed. Six of these 46 participants included a Johnnie To film in their 10 best of the decade.

Triangle—Aurelia Dubouloz, film scholar

Sparrow—Brian Hu, PhD candidate

Breaking News—Huang Weikai, director

PTU—Shelly Kraicer, critic and film festival programmer

PTU—Edwin Mak, critic

Exiled—Michael Sicinski, university professor

¹¹ <http://dgeneratefilms.com/uncategorized/best-chinese-language-films-of-the-2000s-ballot/>.

This amounts to five different Johnnie To films selected by six participants. If the Honorable Mentions are also factored in, the results are as follows:

Election 1 and 2—Michael Berry, university professor

Election 1 and 2—Edwin Mak, critic

Election—William Phuan, programmer

PTU—William Phuan, programmer

The Mission—Bérénice Reynaud, academic (technically, *The Mission* was released in Hong Kong in 1999, but it wasn't shown in the West until 2000.)

PTU turns out to be the film with the highest profile among the critics, academics, directors and programmers surveyed by <http://dgenerate.com>. With the possible exception of *PTU*, it is apparent how little consensus there is among the film critics and professionals about what constitutes Johnnie To's best films.

A similar "ten best" poll was conducted by *Cahiers du Cinéma* and appeared in the January 2010 issue of the journal.¹² Critics were charged with identifying the ten best films from anywhere in the world in that time frame and were not restricted to Chinese language films. Critics and directors submitted 48 Ten Best lists to the journal. Only one participant, Joachim Lepastier, chose a film by Johnnie To, selecting *Election 1 and 2*. It seems that Johnnie To's work is still primarily known and admired by a niche audience for Asian film generally and Hong Kong film in particular. Even a critic of Asian film as prominent as Tony Rayns has only disdain for To's films.

It's hard not to see the concerted push to promote To's films—originated by the festival and the critics' association in Hong Kong and picked up by a few critics and festival programmers in

¹² "Les années 2000", *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no. 652 (janvier 2010), 6-53.

the west—as a product of nostalgia for the glory days of the Hong Kong film industry: To is valued as the only figure capable of bringing back the good times when the industry dominated the regional market and had a global reach...the attempts to boost him into the pantheon seems doomed....*Exiled*, certainly one of his better films, is not a gangster movie but a pastiche, second-hand in everything from its “stylish” lighting and camera moves to its view of hitmen alienation and redemption. If it didn’t star such beautiful men...it wouldn’t be in UK distribution at all.¹³

We can witness in the past decade the growing interest in Johnnie To’s films from a small group of critics and academics, many of whom specialize in Asian or Hong Kong cinema. Although Johnnie To is now a fixture on the international film festival circuit, including the most prestigious festivals, he still has a long way to go to be universally lauded by important international critics. One place, however, where he has gained widespread and oftentimes enthusiastic acceptance has been among enthusiasts of Asian and Hong Kong film on the Internet.

To On-line: Critics and Professors, Fanboys and Bloggers

I think it is fair to say that information about film and film criticism has exploded on line in the past decade. There are innumerable information sites, news aggregator sites, on-line versions of trade papers like *Variety* and journals like *Sight and Sound* and *Cahiers du Cinéma*. There are all manner of general film sites offering reviews and news in addition to interviews, forums, articles, etc. Whatever you want to know about film, it seems, you can find it on line. Just a cursory glance of a selection at sites, such as those collected as worthy of

¹³ Tony Rayns, “Review of *Exiled*,” *Sight and Sound*, vol. 17, issue 7, 48-49.

attention on David Bordwell's blog,¹⁴ shows how much information, opinion and analysis of film, all types of film, current and past, from whatever region, whatever genre, is featured somewhere on the web. Half the battle is finding the sources that correspond to a particular interest. For Hong Kong film, generally, and Johnnie To, in particular, the internet is a major place to learn about, discuss and even watch his films.

There appear to be three primary types of film people who write for these on-line publications. First are the bloggers. Some style themselves cinephiles and blog extensively on world cinema, especially what many now call "art house" cinema. Others are academics who publish works of scholarship, whether as work in progress or highly polished essays with all of the critical accoutrements of academic scholarship. A prominent film scholar, David Bordwell, has turned his blog into an intoxicating or infuriating platform (your view of this will vary depending on your opinion of Bordwell's methodology of film) for expounding his views on cinema, with highly polished articles that masquerade as extensive blog entries. Some of the entries could be drafts of chapters to appear in upcoming monographs, variations on papers presented at conferences or contributions to scholarly studies on film. Other blogs are the work of "ordinary film-watching" folk who want to record what they have watched and share it with their on-line friends and fans. Finally, there are those whose interest in film tends toward "genre" cinema, especially action, martial arts, horror, etc. In many ways, this last group of bloggers is an outgrowth of the fanboy culture that is so prominent in certain Asian film circles. A good example of this is *Twitch* (<http://twitchfilm.net>).

Twitch was founded in September of 2004 by Todd Brown, an aficionado of international, independent and cult films. Twitch lists 13 genre categories on its home page: action, animation, comedy, cult, documentary, drama, exploitation,

¹⁴ <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/>

horror, martial arts, musical, sci-fi and fantasy, thriller and western. Many of these genres have traditionally been marginalized by critics and film historians--action, cult, exploitation, horror and martial arts--and it is just such genres that Hong Kong and other Asian film industries have embraced with enthusiasm. But *Twitch* is much more than news and reviews of films, it is, in fact, a developed internet community with enthusiastic reader participation through reader comments and forum posts. An example pertinent to our discussion of Johnnie To is an article posted by Michael Guillen, May 10, 2008, "PFA: HONG KONG NOCTURNE—Twitch on To."¹⁵ The function of *Twitch* is apparent in Guillen's first sentence of his post: "Whenever I come up against a genre I'm not too familiar with—especially from an Asian director—I need research no further than *Twitch*." Guillen is posting the schedule of the upcoming Pacific Film Archives Johnnie To retrospective "Hong Kong Nocturne" May 29 through June 27, 2008. Curious about the films, none of which he has seen, Guillen pulls together a compendium of what his colleagues at *Twitch* have to say about the films appearing at this festival. But only five of the nine films were reviewed on *Twitch*. Guillen then says: "Hopefully, the Twitch readership will comment on the rest," and comment they do. Guillen juxtaposes excerpts of every review of a given Johnnie To film posted on *Twitch*. It is interesting to note the diversity of opinions expressed in the reviews, even of the same film. Links to the full text of each excerpted review are presented at the end of the *Twitch* article. Then there are the 13 comments posted by readers of Guillen's post, expressing their own opinions of the films, responding to what Guillen wrote in his article, and even to what other commentators have posted. It is a lively exchange, with a range of opinions expressed. The conversation stays firmly focused on the films themselves and the pros and cons of various aspects of the movies are presented in a cogent and often quite perceptive fashion. Those commenting appear quite familiar not only with the individual films under discussion, but also with Johnnie To's oeuvre generally and, by extension, one feels with a great many other Hong Kong films.

¹⁵ Michael Guillen, "PFA: Hong Kong Nocturne—Twitch on To,"
<http://twitchfilm.net/news/2008/05/pfa-hong-kong-nocturnetwitch-on-to.php>.

These posters may not be film historians or academics, but they impose criteria on the films they watch and make assessments based on how those films adhere to these criteria. The writers may not have the breadth and depth of film knowledge and formal education in film theory that some prominent film critics and academics possess, but these internet critics/bloggers often notice a lot that the professional critics miss.

There are sites specializing in Hong Kong film coverage such as HKCinemagic.com, with a mix of news, reviews, bios of professionals in the industry and informative articles and interviews. News from the Hong Kong film industry is duly translated into English and posted on the *HKDB Daily News* (<http://hkmdb.com/news/>). *LoveHKfilm* (<http://www.lovehkfilm.com>) is another site featuring contextually informed reviews from a fellow who goes by the nom-de-plume of “Kozo”. It also occasionally posts reader polls (the top 100 films of the 90s, anyone?) and other interesting special features, though they do not have interviews or articles. *HKCinemagic* offers perhaps the most extensive and varied coverage of Hong Kong film, including a French-language forum on Milkyway Image that posts breaking news on films Johnnie To is producing and directing.¹⁶ Various blogs are linked to most of these sites and are updated with varying frequency.

The world of blogs proper also features a surprising amount of information on Hong Kong cinema and the films of Johnnie To. Blogs like *Roast Pork Sliced from a Rusty Cleaver* (<http://yellowcranestower.blogspot.com>) and similar blogs cover a lot of the same ground as *HKDB Daily News* site, but often with additional coverage of Hong Kong and Mainland starlets, and that peculiarly Hong Kong phenomenon of the Cantopop singing idol/movie actor. There is even an Italian blog dedicated exclusively to the world of Johnnie To and his films, <http://johnnieto.blogspot.com>, though sadly it has not been updated since 2007.

¹⁶ <http://forum.hkcinemagic.com/f19-Milkyway-Image.html>

Finally, there are the academic heavyweights who write about Hong Kong Cinema and show a special interest in Johnnie To. Most important of these currently is David Bordwell, eminent American film scholar and author of *Planet Hong Kong*.¹⁷ Prof. Bordwell has posted blogs detailing screenings of Johnnie To films at the Hong Kong International Film Festival, visits to the set of various Johnnie To films, interviews with technical directors on some of his films and even accounts (with pictures) of karaoke night with Mr. and Mrs. To in Hong Kong! This website also includes informative entries on a wealth of other topics of interest to fans of Hong Kong cinema, including Shawscope and Wong Kar-Wai's *Days of Being Wild*. The internet, much more than the established print outlets, is where the liveliest exchanges about Johnnie To's work appear and where the most up-to-date information is published. Perhaps the one great weaknesses of the Internet is a dearth of in-depth analysis of To's work. For that, we must turn to the academics and their uses of To and his films.

The Academics

Compared to the other interested parties, the academic community was a johnny-come-lately to the party. The fanboys had embraced To's films beginning with 1993's *Heroic Trio* and then early Milkyway Image movies such as *A Hero Never Dies* right through to recent works like *Exiled*. The critics and festival programmers discovered To in the early 2000s, beginning with *The Mission*, and have been particularly engaged with his more personal recent films such as *Election 1 & 2*, *Mad Detective* and *Sparrow*. The academics, on the other hand, took a much longer time to draw Johnnie To and his films into their discussion.

The academy first showed an interest in the films of Johnnie To around 2005. Earlier academic interest in the cinema of Hong Kong had focused on narratives of Chineseness, the diaspora, or transnational or global identity. Because To's

¹⁷ Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong*.

work doesn't seem to be part of any school, trend or movement, or of direct significance to such debates, it was largely ignored. Likewise, To was not involved in any cinematic discourse on postcolonial, post-handover identity politics that so preoccupied intellectuals in the lead-up to the 1997 handover of Hong Kong to China. To's films also don't easily fit the requirements of auteur theory because of his varied, some might say uneven output. Furthermore, discussions focusing on genre cinema in Hong Kong have a tendency not to feel entirely comfortable with To because his most personal films belong and yet at the same time don't quite belong to firmly defined film genres.

The earliest attempt by an academic and/or critic to discuss To within a critical theoretical framework is Andrew Grossman in his 2001 article for *Sense of Cinema*, "The Belated Auteurism of Johnnie To."¹⁸ Grossman has a hard time fitting To's oeuvre into the framework of either auteur theory or genre theory. To's body of work is characterized as too multifaceted and chameleonic to display any particular guiding formal or thematic principle, so he is categorized as a director of genre films. But then the Milkyway Image films of Johnnie To are described as deconstructionist, a burlesque spoofing of genre conventions that To had practiced throughout his career. It is significant that the two most common ways of viewing To and his filmmaking—the work of an auteur, or, conversely, the work of a technically impeccable director firmly entrenched in genre filmmaking—are laid out and applied to To and his films at such an early date. These two incongruent views of To will continue to play an important part in all subsequent discussions of To by members of the academic community. For example David Bordwell, who is generally quite savvy about Hong Kong cinema, in his brief 2003 *Art Forum* article reaches the rather limited conclusion that To's chief accomplishment has been to create a more sophisticated and complex type

¹⁸ Andrew Grossman, "The Belated Auteurism of Johnnie To," *Senses of Cinema*, <http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/12/to.html>

of urban crime film.¹⁹ Again, the discussion is firmly situated in an examination of To as a maker of genre film.

The first extended treatment of To and his films is a 2005 essay by Laikwan Pang.²⁰ Pang has given herself the unenviable task of trying to discern a pattern to To's Milkyway Image films from 1997 through 2004. Critical for her is the division of To's Milkyway Image oeuvre into two phases: 1997-99, the gangster genre films, and 2000-04, the female-oriented light romantic comedies. She goes so far as to characterize *Needing You* as a turning point in Hong Kong film history, with a return to films dominated by female protagonists and aimed at female audiences: something not seen since the 1960s. The writer's conclusion demonstrates just how risky it is to posit sweeping theories in relation to contemporary commercial filmmaking. Pang did not recognize the major dividing line that *Infernal Affairs* and to a lesser extent To's own *PTU* represented in the subsequent history of Hong Kong cinema. For this reason, her arguments have already lost most of their currency less than five years after they were published.

The first monograph dedicated to To, Stephen Teo's *Director in Action: Johnnie To and the Hong Kong Action Film*, appeared at the relatively late date of 2007, after the apotheosis of To at the major European international film festivals.²¹ Stephen Teo is one of the most knowledgeable and respected writers on Hong Kong cinema and his monograph on To, the outgrowth of a doctoral dissertation, was widely anticipated in film studies and cinephile circles. It is a dense, theory-driven work betraying its origins as a doctoral dissertation. The academic theories Teo espouses in this work by and large dictate how he views To's films, especially the films To directed or co-directed since the establishment of

¹⁹ David Bordwell, "The Films of Johnnie To: Louder Than Words—Critical Essay—Biography," *Art Forum*, May 2003, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_9_41/ai_101779192/

²⁰ Laikwan Pang, "Post-1997 Hong Kong masculinities," Laikwan Pang and Day Wong, eds., *Masculinities and Hong Kong Cinema*, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), 35-55.

²¹ Stephen Teo, *Director in Action: Johnnie To and the Hong Kong Action Film* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007).

Milkyway Image. Despite all of the theoretical trappings, Teo reduces his discussion of To to two main themes: To as a genre director of action films and To as an “uneven auteur”. This is the same view of To Grossman had already articulated in his 2001 *Senses of Cinema* article. Teo’s rather reductive view of To disappoints by failing to offer either penetrating insights into To as a filmmaker or a more profound understanding of his films, both of which had been anticipated with the publication of this book.

In 2009 two critical studies of To appeared, each authored by a professor attached to a Hong Kong university. Enough time had passed since the watershed year of 1997 and its immediate aftermath to discern new patterns in Hong Kong filmmaking, patterns that the films of Johnnie To are interpreted as embodying. Vivian P.Y. Lee published a monograph, *Hong Kong Cinema Since 1997: The Post-Nostalgic Imagination*, that examines Hong Kong cinema since the handover of Hong Kong to China.²² She applies the theory of post-nostalgic imagination to Hong Kong cinema in this critical decade since 1997. Her emphasis is on the local visual culture, in this case Hong Kong films. She regards the cinematic image as providing connections to the larger sociopolitical realities of Hong Kong.

Lee provides a brief historical background of Hong Kong cinema before the handover. She then discusses the “post-nostalgic,” which she views as a serious attempt to regain a sense of history by a self-conscious grounding in the local popular cultural tradition, especially that of filmmaking. She highlights Johnnie To and his films since 1997 as a key figure in the transformation of the action genre, and recognizes his role in bringing that genre to international audiences. She also describes To as an “internationalized Hong Kong auteur.”²³ Lee devotes three chapters of the book, 72 pages out of 217, to a study of Hong Kong action

²² Vivian P.Y. Lee, *Hong Kong Cinema Since 1997: The Post-Nostalgic Imagination* (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

²³ Lee, *Hong Kong Cinema Since 1997*, 87-88.

cinema and its changing aesthetic. One 30-page chapter is devoted to Johnnie To. Four films carry the weight of her argument in this chapter: *The Mission*, *Exiled*, *PTU* and *Mad Detection*. Lee situates these films within the action genre and relates them to the heroic prototypes established in the films of John Woo, and developed since the mid-1980s. In the films of Johnnie To, Lee recognizes a move away from action-as-spectacle to action as part of an unfolding psychological drama. Lee credits To with successfully creating a new cinematic vocabulary that synthesizes old and new forms.

Quite different from Lee's general survey of Hong Kong cinema since the handover is Michael Ingham's study of a single To film, *PTU*, published as part of the New Hong Kong Cinema Series.²⁴ In a lengthy first chapter Ingham looks at To's career as a filmmaker and lays out his place within Hong Kong cinema since the 1980s. Ingham is of the opinion that Johnnie To should not be described as an action director. He questions the use of the term "action film" as a specific critically and professionally acknowledged genre, noting its origin as a video store label. Instead of the "action" genre, Ingham places many of Johnnie To's most accomplished solo directorial efforts since the founding of Milkyway Image into the category of the *policier* or crime genre. In contrast to Lee, who looks to To's films for evidence of the "post-nostalgic" imagination, Ingham views To's films as part of a discourse on violence and power, on professionalism and ethical responsibility in Hong Kong society. He sees this as characteristic of the post-1997 discourse that is shared by films like the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy, but is not found in the pre-1997 anxiety films. As with Lee, Ingham also connects To's output to the "heroic bloodshed" tradition that originated with John Woo and Ringo Lam. Specifically, Ingham looks at how To deconstructs the genre and character types of this filmic tradition.

²⁴ Michael Ingham, *Johnnie To-Kei-fung's PTU* (Hong Kong: Hong University Press, 2009), 1-33.

Taking up the question of whether or not Johnnie To is an “auteur,” Ingham characterizes To’s cinema as distinctly Hong Kong rather than transnational. He feels that To’s roots are as much in the Asian cinema of Hong Kong’s genre films as in great foreign directors. Looking at the auteur question in relationship to Johnnie To, Ingham notes that few Hong Kong filmmakers thought of or think of themselves as “auteurs.” Ingham notes that To shies away from using the term in discussing his own work and it is not a category that Ingham finds particularly useful or descriptive in his discussion of To.

Academic discussions focusing on the work of Johnnie To since the founding of Milkyway Image in 1997 restrict themselves to viewing To from two not wholly compatible perspectives: To as director of genre films that are the heirs of the local heroic bloodshed tradition as established by John Woo, or To as a highly idiosyncratic auteur whose output does not neatly fit within any accepted definition of auteur filmmaking.

Both views of To and his works have a tendency to be reductive and, to be true to their tenants, must leave out a large number of To’s films since 2000. Such restrictive theories, which marginalize or simply ignore half or more of To’s work, call into question the appropriateness of either theory as a comprehensive framework for analyzing this filmmaker and his entire output. Compounding the difficulty is To’s continued evolution as an active and highly prolific filmmaker. Furthermore, the theories proposed to date also do not fully acknowledge the tension in To’s lengthy career between art and commerce, a tension that exerts its considerable pull on every film To has produced, co-directed or directed. This tension, as much as anything else, has had a major hand in shaping Johnnie To as a filmmaker, a tension which he has amply acknowledged and discussed in interviews over the years. While it is an acknowledgement of sorts that the films of Johnnie To have recently been drawn into academic discussions of Hong Kong cinema, the increased scrutiny has yet to yield significant insights into Johnnie To

and his importance as a filmmaker within Hong Kong, his importance as a Hong Kong filmmaker on the international stage, or his future legacy. Perhaps it is still premature to write the final word on a filmmaker who is at the peak of his creative powers and continues to make films at a rate that would be considered exceptional almost anywhere but Hong Kong. Given the inconclusive and fragmentary picture that has emerged from 10 years of examining To's movies in the context of genre filmmaking and/or auteur theory, perhaps the time has come to move on and to take a fresh look at his work and attempt to discern different patterns, ones more suggestive of fruitful avenues for future inquiry.



*Throw down, © Milkyway Image (HK) Ltd., China Star Entertainment,
Sil-Metropole Organisation, One Hundred Years of Film Company*

Chapter 3

The Johnnie To Story --To by To

Johnnie To in His Own Words: The Interviews

Johnnie To, through the medium of the interview, is an active partner in the creation of the “Johnnie To Story.” Over the years To has given a number of substantial interviews that function less as promotion for specific films than as promotion for the filmmaker himself. He has consciously crafted the general outlines of his own story much like he creates a film script. Although he has been interviewed again and again, To always gives a coherent and consistent picture of his career: from his first contact with cinema as a child to his years of apprenticeship at TVB, from the professional crisis in 1995 that led to the creation of Milkyway Image to the importance of Milkyway Image pictures in establishing To as an artistic filmmaker, and finally his modest acknowledgement of the professional accolades he has received in recent years on the international film festival circuit. The image he shares of his professional life and accomplishments reads like a film script, and one to which the director has remained surprisingly faithful.

Before launching into a detailed analysis of Johnnie To and the Western interview, it is instructive to look at two interviews translated into English and published in Hong Kong on the cusp of his breakthrough in the West. By 2000 Johnnie To was already a critically acclaimed filmmaker in Hong Kong. He was interviewed for two successive editions of the Hong Kong International Film Festival and these interviews were published in the festival catalog for the 1999-

2000 and 2000-2001 editions under the title *Hong Kong Panorama*.²⁵ To was interviewed in 2000, just after he had won critical acclaim in Hong Kong for his two most recent films: *Running Out of Time* and *The Mission*. But this was also the critical year when Johnnie To took on heavy administrative responsibilities at a new film company, 100 Years of Film. The year 2000 was a time of crisis for the Hong Kong film industry. To's stated aim in joining 100 Years of Film was to restructure and reorganize aspects of this industry and put it on a firm financial footing once more. To fully acknowledges the tension between art and commerce in this 2000 interview. But he also admits that, if he had to choose between being a producer, administrator and director, he would choose to be a director.

The Mission assumes a pivotal role in To's oeuvre in this interview. He claims he only knew what filmmaking was about once he made *The Mission*. He describes a new working method developed for this film that he will use again in many of his most personal films in the future. First, To establishes the visuals of the film, and only then does he refer to the script. If the primacy of visuals over plot is established in the director's mind, so, too, is his debt to Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* and the concept of "stillness in action."

In 2001 To and his co-producer/director Wai Ka-Fai were interviewed for that year's edition of the Hong Kong International Film Festival. It is significant to note that the men are interviewed together, each contributing as he sees appropriate, functioning as equals in the interview. As in the films that they collaborated on, each man has his own point-of-view and brings different elements to the project, yet it is also evident that their views are complimentary and they work smoothly together.

²⁵"Beyond *Running Out of Time* & *The Mission*: Johnnie To Ponders One Hundred Years of Film," Interviewed by Li Cheuk-to and Bono Lee, Collated by Bono Lee, *Hong Kong Panorama 1999-2000: The 24th Hong International Film Festival* (Lesiure and Cultural Services Department, 2000), 46-50; Shin, "The Driving Force Behind Milkyway Image," *Hong Kong Panorama 2000-2001*, 49-53.

In this 2001 interview, the two filmmakers are in a position to assess the first year of 100 Years of Film. Wai states that Hong Kong cinema functions on a star system, and that it is not directors who draw audiences to the theaters, but stars. Both men agree that the first year was driven by the necessity of getting 100 Years of Film on a solid financial footing and that this dictated the movies that were made that year--*Needing You*, *Help!!!* and *Wu Yen*--films very different from the gritty crime dramas that Milkyway Image was previously known for. The target for 2001 was good box office and, with the success of these films, in particular *Needing You*, that goal was achieved. The mission of Milkyway Image in the new reality of Hong Kong film is to promote entertainment film.

The first interview Johnnie To gave in the West appears to be the one he did in 2001 with Shelly Kraicer at the Toronto International Film Festival, where his latest film, *Fulltime Killer*, was screening as part of the Midnight Madness series. This interview was published in the on-line film journal *Senses of Cinema*.²⁶ As with the 2001 interview for the Hong Kong International Film Festival, it was another joint interview with Wai Ka-Fai. Kraicer sets the stage for the interview by giving a brief history of Johnnie To's reception in the West (talking about *Heroic Trio* and *The Mission*), together with a professional bio of his work in Hong Kong that situates those two films in a broader context. Kraicer notes that his encounter with To is subsequent to the initial exposure of To's works in the West, specifically at the 2000 Subway Cinema Milkyway Image festival and the 2001 Go Johnnie To seven-film retrospective at the UCLA film archive in conjunction with the Asian Film Foundation.

To opens the interview by citing the driving force of financial concerns on Hong Kong filmmaking at that time. Wai Ka-Fai adds that he and To make a very clear

²⁶ Shelly Kraicer, "Interview: Johnnie To and Wai Ka-fai," *Senses of Cinema*, http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/18/to_and_ka-fai.html

distinction between the commercial genre movies and the personal movies that they direct.

From these three interviews, it is clear that Johnnie To is very aware of the economic aspects of filmmaking and that he is committed to making financially successful films, especially at this critical juncture in the history of the Hong Kong film industry. He is willing to make purely commercial films to bolster the new venture, *100 Years of Film*, created to revitalize that industry. But he also acknowledges that his favorite films are not these commercial films, but more personal films like *The Mission* or *The Longest Nite*. Two of these three interviews are given with his co-producer/director Wai Ka-Fai and display a collegial attitude towards filmmaking that is at odds with the auteur-driven image of the filmmaker prevalent in the West. Interestingly enough, Wai distinguishes between Hong Kong genre films and the more personal films of Milkyway Image. This is a distinction that is not perhaps shared by Western critics and academics, who have chosen to discuss To as a genre filmmaker.

2003 marked Johnnie To's penetration into the commercial U.S. market. He was interviewed by Henry Sheehan in Los Angeles at the office of Palm Pictures, the U. S. distributor of *Fulltime Killer*, which was the first Johnnie To film to be released in the U.S. Sheehan prefaces his interview with To with a concise artistic biography. He especially focuses on the Milkyway Image "gangster" movies. He and To discuss at length the shopping mall shootout in *The Mission* and To offers some clarification on his working methods, which partially contradicts what he had said on this issue in his 2000 interview. (One has to wonder about the role of translators in all of the interviews that are not conducted by bilingual interviewers and how that might alter how we understand To's statements.) To says that when he designs a scene, it is not really about the visual look, but about expression. He also states a theme that he will come back to over and over again

in interviews from here on out: as a filmmaker, To is always searching for something new and he doesn't want to repeat himself from picture to picture.

Another important interview with Johnnie To was conducted by Sean Axmaker in 2004 for *Greencine*.²⁷ Johnnie To was interviewed at the Seattle International Film Festival, where *PTU* was having its North American premier. The *Greencine* interview was one of many To gave during the two days he was in Seattle. Axmaker sets the stage for the interview by putting Johnnie To's works in the context of the history of Hong Kong film, including Johnnie To's early career, which was virtually unknown in the West at this time. It is clear that Axmaker knows a lot about Johnnie To's career and Hong Kong film, generally. Axmaker characterizes Johnnie To's gangster pictures as "the strongest evocation of the romantic criminal code since John Woo left for Hollywood." The interview with Axmaker focuses on three of To's most recent films treating police and gangster subject matter: *Running Out of Time*, *The Mission* and *Fulltime Killer*. To says the heroes in these films can all be described as romanticized heroes, but with *PTU*, his latest film, he has wanted to focus on characters who are more realistic and flawed and so he has left behind the romanticism of the earlier films.

It is evident with these interviews from 2003-04 that To is refocusing his image in the West. No longer is he interviewed jointly with his co-producer/director Wai Ka-Fai. There is little to no discussion of the business of filmmaking in Hong Kong, 100 Years of Film or the economic and artistic crisis in Hong Kong filmmaking. Gone is a discussion of the comedies that were the big box office draws To and Wai co-directed in 2000-01. With *Fulltime Killer*, and then *PTU*, To finally has new films to promote that hark back to the Milkyway Image films like *Running Out of Time*, *The Longest Nite* and *The Mission* that garnered To critical acclaim in Hong Kong and brought him to the attention of audiences in the West around 2000. The films that he wants to present at the film festivals in the West are in the

²⁷ Sean Axmaker, "Karma Chameleon: A Talk with Johnnie To," *Green Cine*, February 19, 2004, <http://www.greencine.com/article?action=view&articleID=111>

police and gangster genre. To barely mentions *Needing You, Help!!!*, *Wu Yen* or the later box office savvy comedies that Milkyway continued to produce until 2004. From here on out, as much as possible To wants to discuss the films that he believes are his most personal expression as a filmmaker, films that resonate with Western international audiences in a way that the culturally more specific Cantonese comedies cannot.

A watershed moment for To is the interview with Charles Leary published in 2004 in *Off Screen*.²⁸ Leary interviewed To in Hong Kong. This is a lengthy interview and includes not only a complete filmography but also a brief bibliography of articles in English about Johnnie To and his cinema. After presenting a brief professional biography, Leary begins the interview. Once again discussion is focused on To's most recent films, in this case *Fulltime Killer* and *Love on a Diet*. Maybe because of the Hong Kong context of the interview, there is the discussion of this comedy, which, otherwise gets no mention in interviews around this time that appear in Western media sources. Perhaps most significant in terms of future discussion of Johnnie To, Leary describes To as an "auteur," and bolsters this assessment by including a To filmography and bibliography. This is not a term that To or anyone in the Hong Kong milieu had ever applied to To, and one that was absent in discussions of To up until this time (Andrew Grossman, in "The Belated Auteurism of Johnnie To," appears to conclude that it is not really appropriate to apply the term "auteur" (at least in its established usage) to the output of Johnnie To, at least through 2001--the date the article was published.)²⁹ Leary, with his academic background, was reframing the discussion of To and placing him within a cinephile discourse that views filmmakers in a very specific way and judges them according to different criteria than strictly commercial filmmakers.

²⁸ Charles Leary, "Fulltime Killer—Full Time Cinema: An Interview with Johnnie To," *Off Screen*, June 30, 2004, http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/new_offscreen/to_interview.html

²⁹ Andrew Grossman, "The Belated Auteurism of Johnnie To," *Senses of Cinema* no. 12, February-March 2001.

The next major interview with Johnnie To published in a Western language was the interview that Stephen Teo conducted in Hong Kong in December 2004 with Johnnie To, concurrent with the shooting of *Election*. This interview did not appear in print, however, until the 2007 publication of Teo's *Director in Action: Johnnie To and the Hong Kong Action film*. In the interval between Leary's interview and Teo's, Johnnie To has seen the release of three important films that were of interest to Western audiences: *Running on Karma* (co-directed with Wai Ka-Fai), *Throw Down* and *Breaking News*. All of these films received premiers at important international film festivals and clearly To's star was on the rise in the West. Unlike Western interviewers, Teo interviewed To in Cantonese without the intermediary of a translator, so one has the impression that the interview flowed in a spontaneous and free-flowing manner, unlike the rigidity of so many of the Western interviews. To also must have known Teo from his years in Hong Kong writing about Hong Kong cinema and his association with the Hong Kong International Film Festival. To rewards Teo with one of his longest interviews (29 pages in print), and one that is quite interesting from many perspectives. Anyone who is interested in Johnnie To and his films would profit from a close reading of this interview.

The interview ranges widely over not only To's professional career, but even over his formative years before he joined TVB and got involved first in television production, then directing and producing films. Every period of To's career is examined. Several key concepts central to Teo's arguments in the attached monograph are broached in this interview. When Teo asks To about genre, To rejects the notion of genre saying that genre is not important, that he doesn't like to categorize himself in terms of genre, nor does he demarcate his films according to genre. Likewise, when Teo asks To if he is an "uneven auteur," To does not have a ready answer and seems disinclined to continue that line of inquiry. What To does want to talk about, however, is the concept of the group

and his interest in the group as the microcosm of humanity (in retrospect quite *a propos* as To was in the middle of shooting *Election* at the time of the interview). To also discusses the creation of Milkyway as a way for him to exert greater creative control over his work.

In discussing his career as a filmmaker, To admits that he doesn't have an overview of where he is heading as a director. "I have no way as yet to determine what the method and the direction of my thinking is. I need to make more films, and see more films, including the classics...what kind of director will I be? That's the aim I've given myself a time limit. In three years at least, I will have the solution."³⁰ Finally, when Teo interviewed To in Melbourne about *Election* in August 6, 2005 and he asked To what, in his opinion, was the most outstanding scene in *Election*, To simply responded, "I don't know." Then he confesses, somewhat sadly, that his own favorite movie is *Throw Down*, but nobody is talking about it.³¹

When Michael Ingham interviewed To in 2007, he gave the filmmaker an opportunity to respond to some of the things Stephen Teo had said about him in *Director in Action*. The interview is an appendix to a short monograph on the film *PTU* published in the New Hong Kong Cinema Series.³² Like Teo, Ingham interviews To at his Milkyway Image offices in Hong Kong, though he requires the agency of a translator to conduct the interview and transcribe the transcripts.

In addition to a lot of questions that pertain directly to the film *PTU*, Ingham also asks To a number of more general questions. He asks To directly about Teo's characterization of him as an "uneven auteur." To responds not to the question of whether or not he is an auteur, but if he is an uneven auteur with this rather

³⁰ Teo, *Director in Action*, 242.

³¹ Teo, *Director in Action*, 248.

³² Michael Ingham, *PTU*.

neutral remark, "...what he said might be right."³³ Then Ingham asks To if he is a director of action pictures. To replies quite definitively: *PTU* is not an action picture, "*PTU* is quite...a dark cult movie."³⁴ When asked whether he agrees with certain reviewers who have found the characterization and plot in *PTU* to be a bit underdeveloped, and also whether or not Hong Kong and overseas audiences understand the film in the same way, To gives this interesting answer:

...if they are not satisfied with my film, or they may think its shallow at a certain level, they may be right, but that's not what I want to talk about. It's not my main focus, I think.... When I work on a movie, I like to think that it's not about whether the character is good-looking or not. It's about the combination of images and characters, the overall picture, the way of story-telling.³⁵

Finally, when Ingham asks To about the allure of making films in the West and whether he is planning to make films in Hollywood or Europe, the director offers a response that shows he has thought long and hard on the issue:

What I feel is that movies are a symbolic projection of one's culture.... It goes without saying that any film you make overseas must be different from what you can make in your own cultural context. I don't believe that such a film would either touch or be felt so clearly by audiences. Even if I have the chance to make such a movie today, necessarily it would have to be a commercial undertaking rather than the type of film that I really want to make.... In very commercial enterprises you have to consider what the movie company people are thinking about, instead of what you are thinking about.³⁶

³³ Ingham, *PTU*, 130.

³⁴ Ingham, *PTU*, 140.

³⁵ Ingham, *PTU*, 140.

³⁶ Ingham, *PTU*, 141-142.

Since attaining the position of a prominent international filmmaker with the premier of *Election* in competition at Cannes in 2005, To appears to have been interviewed more and more, and often by those who were less familiar with the history of Hong Kong cinema and, by extension, To's earlier work. More and more specialized cinephile and mass market publications have featured interviews with To when he is promoting his latest film at an international festival. There were also increasingly frequent retrospectives of Johnnie To's films around the world, with their attendant interviews. A large percentage of these interviews were the result of To's promotion of individual films on the international circuit. For this reason, they usually have a circumscribed focus on a specific film that is being introduced to foreign audiences who see To and his cinematic work in a particular way. Furthermore, many of these interviews are limited to a fairly superficial set of questions that betray the interviewer's paucity of knowledge of To's oeuvre and its context. The most common topics in these often short interviews are discussions of genre and genre filmmaking and the issue of To as an auteur filmmaker, a label that the director generally accepts after the 2005 premier of *Election* at Cannes. This is in marked contrast to To skirting the term in earlier interviews, especially in a Hong Kong context. Nick Dawson in an interview with To that appeared in the May 2008 issue of *Filmmaker Magazine* asks To point blank: "*Do you see yourself as an auteur?*"

In typical Hong Kong fashion, To responds to the question, without, however, directly answering it. "*'Auteur' is such a big word. But I think nothing matters more than making a film that reflects who you are as a person.*"³⁷

Then Dawson broaches the question of genre.

Dawson: "*Do you see genre as a help or a hindrance to filmmakers?*"

³⁷ Nick Dawson, "Johnnie To, *Mad Detective*, The Director Interviews, *Filmmaker Magazine*, Friday, July 18, 2008, <http://filmmakermagazine.com/directorinterviews/2008/07/johnnie-to-mad-detective.html>

To: *"Hong Kong film is based on genre films.... In a way it helps audiences to be more receptive to our films. We believe a good commercial film is 70% formula and 30% fresh ideas. Audiences enjoy familiarity because they want to be entertained. But at the same time they want to be surprised. As a filmmaker, I think it is very difficult to find the balance."*

By 2008, the Western characterization of Johnnie To as an auteur seems to have been embraced by the local Hong Kong media. Edmund Lee titles his interview with To for *Time Out Hong Kong*, "Johnnie To: The Auteur."³⁸ It appears that To is considered a bona-fide auteur now even on his home turf, something that might have been inconceivable only a few years earlier. It might be instructive to consider the rising prominence of To in the West and the fact that he was a regular fixture on the international film festival circuit since 2000 as contributing to his newly elevated local status. Even on his home turf, To now fully embraces the designation "auteur." Talking about the differences between the enthusiastic reception of his films abroad versus in Hong Kong, To says, "You get standing ovations that last several minutes in those film festivals." In Hong Kong he says audiences are running for the exit as soon as the credits roll and he complains that Hong Kong viewers only want easy and instant gratification, as if a movie was a video game. Finally, To acknowledges that at this point in his career he is interested in film as art and not the release of box office champions. "As my experience with cinema increases, I realize that I'm getting further away from box office success. But then I think, even though you can't get the biggest reward in the box office, at least you can attract a certain audience and I'm more attracted by the auteur theory." It is hard to say if To's self-identification as an auteur filmmaker is the result of changing perceptions of his work over time, the evolution of his filmmaking to more closely approximate auteur filmmaking, or increased exposure to the type of distinctive filmmaking that characterizes

³⁸ Edmund Lee, "Johnnie To: The Auteur," *Time Out Hong Kong*, posted: 14 July 2008, <http://www.timeout.com.hk/film/features/11674/johnnie-to-the-auteur.html>

auteurs in other countries. Or perhaps To is simply bowing to the chorus of voices that want to bestow on him the title of auteur, or again some combination of all of the above. But I think it is safe to say that To is now considered by many critics, academics and filmgoers around the world as an important international filmmaker, and by some as an auteur. The seriousness with which To now regards his filmmaking, his appreciation of his international standing, the possibilities this opens up for his work and his reflections on where he wants to take his career in the future are explored in depth in two key interviews.

Johnnie To: The Extended Interviews

Johnnie To gave two extended interviews between 2008 and 2010. In both instances he was not promoting a film at a film festival, and in each case the lengthy interview functioned as a summation of his career to date.

In 2008 To was interviewed in Cantonese by a group of writers from *HKCinemagic*.³⁹ To was in Paris to attend the most important film retrospective of his career at the Cinémathèque Française, March 5 - April 11, 2008. Representative films from To's entire career--across all genres--were screened, many of them for the first time outside of Asia.

The other major career retrospective interview was for the cable news channel CNN and was a featured program on Talk Asia, a weekly interview program produced in Hong Kong. This 22 1/2 minute interview is now available to a worldwide audience on the program's website archive.⁴⁰ Footage of To's interview is interspersed with scenes from his films, which are used to introduce topics of discussion or to illustrate To's comments, including even documentary

³⁹ Van-Thuan Ly, Arnaud Lanuque and David-Olivier Vidouze, "Le Dernier Homme: Interview Johnnie To" (Mars 2008), *Hong Kong Cinemagic*, in French
<http://www.hkcinemagic.com/fr/page.asp?aid=265>

⁴⁰ "Johnnie To: Shooting Asia," *CNN Talk Asia*, February 12, 2010, interview program, imbedded video file, <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/SHOWBIZ/02/10/johnnie.to/index.html>

footage of the walled city of Kowloon where To lived for some years as a child. This interview is framed as a career retrospective, covering all of To's artistic career, though with a more selective discussion of specific films than the *HKCinemagic* interview. In both interviews, the interviewers seem very knowledgeable about Hong Kong cinema and To's career, which gives him the opportunity to speak at length on a host of subjects that he has touched on in a more limited fashion in earlier interviews. The only other interview that comes close to these two in depth and breadth is the interview with Stephen Teo in late 2004. But Teo focused the discussion on certain topics determined by issues he was exploring in his dissertation, and so had a tendency to frame his questions to To accordingly. The overlay of academic theory through which Teo views To's work sometimes even appears to contradict statements To makes about his films, and this leads to instances of Teo and To talking "at" rather than "to" one another. The two interviews under consideration here largely avoid these pitfalls and each is conducted in a manner that draws out To to speak at length about subjects dear to his heart, as well as getting him to comment in his own way on some subjects of interest to the interviewers.

In the 2008 interview with *HKCinemagic*, To states that he sees the Paris retrospective as the end of one phase of his career and the beginning of another. He likewise describes 1995 as another equally important turning point in his career. It marked the end of To's work as a totally commercial filmmaker of movies that were star vehicles and more often controlled by their stars than by their director. After a very bad experience working with Stephen Chow on *Mad Monk*, To considered quitting the movie business altogether. For an entire year he did not make a movie, which, for a prolific director like To, must have felt like an eternity. But in 1996 he reentered the film business with a renewed commitment to making only the kinds of films he wanted to make. To achieve this end, To and Wai Ka-fai create Milkyway Image, Ltd. and set out not only to

revitalize To's career but also the entire Hong Kong film industry, which at that time was approaching its nadir.

One has to ask, however, if this tidy characterization of To's career post-1996 is entirely accurate? If we look at his filmography and remember the interviews that To gave from 2000 to the release of *PTU* in 2003, we are confronted with nine commercial, star-driven vehicles showcasing such popular artists as Cecilia Cheung, Anita Mui, Sammi Cheng and, most spectacularly, Andy Lau, who starred in five of these films. To clearly states in more than a few interviews that these were overtly commercial films designed to bring spectators back to Hong Kong movie theaters to watch Hong Kong-produced films. They were also designed as commercial vehicles to fund the new film venture 100 Years of Cinema that got off the ground in 2000 after Milkyway Image nearly went bankrupt in 1999. To, even as late as 2008, acknowledges that he makes films for local Hong Kong Chinese audiences that are topical and not readily understood by outsiders. It is just these films, however, that seem to be the biggest money makers. In earlier interviews To openly acknowledges his dual strategy. The overtly commercial films with big stars are designed to be popular commercial hits that, in turn, fund more personal projects that will not have the box office draw, but will satisfy To's need to also make personal, not necessarily commercial films. When To stopped making these commercial money-making films and is known exclusively in the West for more personal, noir-tinged police and gangster films, he now downplays the commercial movies in Western interviews, though one feels he isn't ashamed of these films (some of which were quite commercially and critically successful in Hong Kong). He tellingly says in the *HKCinemagic* interview that sometimes you have to do something you don't like doing, as if the compromise represented by this type of film does not sit too well with To now that he is acknowledged as an "auteur" by many Western critics. (But it should be noted that To currently has two blatantly commercial films in production, aimed squarely at the mainland

Chinese market, with a third commercial picture in pre-production that would re-team Sammi Cheng and Andy Lau, To's superstar rom-com team from the 2000s.)

It is interesting to examine To's stories about how he got into filmmaking, his first exposure to cinema as a child and the directors that have influenced him over the years. In the 2008 interview for *HKCinemagic*, To describes getting into film as an "accident." As he stated in earlier interviews, he was considering four different jobs as a young man: police officer, soccer player, phone company employee or courier at TVB (one of the major Hong Kong television stations). He went to work for TVB because they were the first ones to call him back and offer him a job.

Contrast this with the 2010 interview with CNN. He mentions the same four career choices, and also that TVB called him first. But rather than an "accident," To now describes the incident as an act of "fate" or "destiny." He plainly states that it was destiny that his career would be in the film industry and, given the choice to do it all over again, he would choose to be a filmmaker.

To's description of his early contact with cinema and the films and directors that were influential on him has also varied from interview to interview. It is clear from what he says in a number of interviews that To was exposed to cinema at a young age. What is less clear, however, are the exact circumstances of that exposure. In the *HKCinemagic* interview To says his father worked in a store or warehouse (the French term "entrepôt" is not specific) behind (or at the back of?) a movie theater and that he watched movies from behind the screen. In To's 2004 interview with Stephen Teo, To says his father worked as a janitor at the Prince's (Tung Lok) Cinema in Mongkok, and that the young To watched films from backstage, and that he did so until his father left the company and the family moved to another part of the city.⁴¹ In the 2010 interview with Talk Asia, To describes his father as working as an inventory clerk in a cinema. It is hard to

⁴¹ Teo, *Director in Action*, 215.

account for the fluidity of the elder Mr. To's profession, from janitor to working in a warehouse or store behind the cinema to being an inventory clerk in the cinema itself, except to say that Johnnie To was more aware of his rising international prominence by 2008, and perhaps wanted to downplay the fact that his father was employed as a janitor. One can hardly doubt Stephen Teo's account as linguistic misunderstanding since he conducted the interview with To in Cantonese and translated it himself into English.

Something similar happens when we look at To's description of his cinematic influences from childhood. In earlier interviews when To talks about films and directors, he mentions mostly American genres such as Westerns and crime dramas, and American directors like Sam Peckinpah, Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola, as well as unnamed local Hong Kong movies and directors. He also mentions his debt to Akira Kurosawa from his earliest interviews. In the 2008 *HKCinemagic* interview To says he became an ardent movie-goer at some point after the experience of watching films behind the screen as a young child. Now his list of films has been expanded and, while still including local films and Hollywood films, there is now the addition of European movies and an expanded catalog of genre pictures, such as film noir, Italian sword and spear epics and French *policier* movies starring Alan Delon. Joining the ranks of Kurosawa and Peckinpah, there are now Sergio Leone and Jean-Pierre Melville. (In this interview, To admits that he must have seen many Melville pictures because they starred his favorite actor, Alain Delon, before he knew the name of the director.) As To's star has risen in the West, he is careful to mention more and more Western, especially European filmmakers in his catalog of influences, names that were almost totally absent from his interviews before 2007. This was also the period of time when To was attempting to put together the production deal that would result in the creation of *Vengeance*, a joint venture between Hong Kong, U.S. and European partners, and he was actively courting Alain Delon to be the star of this feature. In the 2010 Talk Asia interview, there is no discussion of

cinematic influences on To. In that interview, he has begun to downplay his stature as an international filmmaker by stating that he doesn't want to be a superstar director or a big name. He is just a man who has a passion for movies and enjoys making them more than anything else. This is, importantly, the interview where To introduces the idea of the hand of destiny and the inevitability of his career as a filmmaker.

In the CNN interview when To is asked about why people tend to view *The Mission* as To's masterpiece, he responds in a surprising way: "I haven't thought of that before. I didn't expect it to have that effect." Then he stresses the material constraints on the creation of this film: little money, little time, and even little film stock (so no possibility of retakes). What he describes is a film that is a work of reflexive filmmaking, something created at such breakneck speed that there wasn't time to sit down and consider each element of the film calmly and reflectively. Instead, decisions have to be made on the fly without thinking them through, relying on instinct and past experience alone. Perhaps this is To's way of implying that only a highly talented filmmaker could work this way and produce a masterpiece. This mitigates, somewhat, the extreme modesty that To displays at the beginning of the interview when he states that he doesn't want to be a big name director or be seen as a superstar. He back-handedly acknowledges the critics' view of *The Mission* as a tour-de-force of filmmaking by describing how the film was actually made, implying that only a master of filmmaking could have produced an acknowledged masterpiece under such conditions.

To is asked in the 2010 CNN interview about the possibility of making Hollywood movies. His reply shows a marked change over earlier interviews. Whereas before To stressed that he was a Hong Kong filmmaker, took Hong Kong as his subject and really only understood Hong Kong and its people, he now admits in the CNN interview that Hollywood is his dream, that he'll get there eventually, it

is just a matter of time. He has also mapped out the potential benefit of making a Johnnie To film in Hollywood. As a filmmaker, he wants to really get something out of the experience of working in Hollywood. He wants to make something that couldn't be made anywhere else but Hollywood. Clearly, the offers from Hollywood must be getting more attractive with his increasing international prominence post-2005. Perhaps *Vengeance* functioned as a gateway to more serious and attractive offers from Hollywood, closer to the filmmaker's terms and conditions, and he therefore has changed his ideas on working in that Mecca of international commercial filmmaking.

But it is interesting to note that as 2010 has progressed, To has begun production on two new films shooting in Hong Kong and Beijing, not Hollywood. One, a comedy slated for release around Chinese New Year and starring popular box office champs Louis Koo and Daniel Wu, seems intended for local Hong Kong and Mainland audiences, and it appears similar to To's earlier commercial money-making ventures such as *Needing You* and *Love on a Diet*. Another film, starring Lau Ching Wan, is also currently in production and this seems to fall into the "personal" film category, such as *Throw Down*, *Election*, *Mad Detective*, etc. Curiously, little seems to have changed after To's international adventures in the period from 2000-2010, except that he seems to be focusing his filmmaker's attention on the Mainland market in a way he has never done before. Only time will tell if Hollywood will come calling with an offer that To finds attractive enough to entice him to Tinseltown, or if his focus on the Mainland Chinese market will compromise his artistic expression in a manner akin to that of virtually every other Hong Kong filmmaker who was enticed by the commercial potential of the Mainland market.

These recent extended interviews illustrate variations of the Johnnie To Story as it is told by the filmmaker in interviews over the past 10 years. The basic elements of the origins of Johnnie To, filmmaker, have been consistent since the

earliest interviews. But in the 2010 CNN interview, To introduces the inevitability of his artistic *métier* by attributing it to fate.

To adroitly uses the interview to communicate with a variety of audiences about what matters to him as a filmmaker at any given moment in time. Certain basic elements remain consistent from interview to interview, whatever the intended audience or point in his professional career. But he is also a master storyteller who is quite capable of customizing the specific details and particular emphasis of his responses to serve a larger professional purpose. In interviews aimed primarily at the North American market, the types of movie genres and directors are overwhelmingly from Hollywood. As To's star rose at the European film festivals and as different European centers mounted major retrospective of To's films, more European genres and directors get special mention. When To was courting Alain Delon for a possible remake of *Le Cercle Rouge*, both Alain Delon and Jean-Pierre Melville are mentioned by name in several interviews. But, with Delon bowing out of the project and *Le Cercle Rouge* replaced by *Vengeance*, there is no discussion of cinematic influences on To in the 2010 interview. Likewise, what To says about Hollywood and his interest in making films in Hollywood has changed significantly over time. In the earlier interviews, Hollywood is not some place that To has a desire to work. He stresses, instead, his origins in Hong Kong, his understanding of Hong Kong and its people, and the impossibility of making the kind of films he wants to make in Hollywood. After the *Le Cercle Rouge* debacle and the making of *Vengeance*, however, Hollywood appears an alluring destination, one that the filmmaker intends to visit at some unnamed future date.

In a certain sense, To tries to tell the intended audience for each interview what it wants to know about him. He carries the script of his own story in his head, much like that of whatever film he is currently shooting. To is infamous in Hong Kong for shooting without a written script, yet he says that he carries everything

in his head, like some internal storyboard, even down to the placement of lights and cameras, sequence of shots and blocking of the actors. He is able to adapt this internal script as needed to the exigencies of shooting, as he is totally in control at every given moment of what is being shot and how.



PTU, © Milkyway Image (HK) Ltd., Mei Ah Films Production Co. Ltd.

Conclusion to the Essay

The Johnnie To Story that To creates through the act of the interview is not, perhaps, all that different from a Johnnie To film. As one of his film scripts evolves during shooting until the last shot is “in the can,” so, too, the Johnnie To Story, as screened in interviews, continues to evolve so long as To’s career as a filmmaker keeps evolving. The final chapter of this fascinating story has yet to be written, as it remains a work in progress.



*Election 2, © Milkyway Image (HK) Ltd.,
One Hundred Years of Film Company, China Star Entertainment.*

PART II

ADDENDUM: THE HONG KONG PERSPECTIVE

Addendum: The HK Perspective, Q&A by Thomas Podvin

Marie Jost's essay gives an historical account of the rise of Johnnie To's fame in the western world and analyzes how he is perceived and understood. In order to balance the perceptions of Western critics, academics and film buffs shown in Ms. Jost's essay, we have gathered the viewpoints of several individuals based in Hong Kong. They are Thomas Shin, Vivian P.Y. Lee, Sebastian Yim, Ross Chen and Can D Tse. They are able to understand Johnnie To's films from a local perspective, and they kindly shared their views with us.

Thomas Shin, A Hong Kong Film Critic

***“Johnnie To is a big man with a kid's heart (...)
influenced by the Wu Xia spirit”***

The first Hong Kong-based person we interviewed was Thomas Shin. Shin is a member of the Hong Kong Film Critics Society and an editor for the Hong Kong Economic Times.

HKCinemagic.com: In the West, Johnnie To is appreciated for his gangster movies (*Election, The Mission*). He is sometimes called an “auteur”. In France we have this romantic notion that an auteur, or an artist works for his art and not to make a living. A director will do a film for the love of art. To barely talks with Western journalists about the business model of his company and how he hopes his films might be financially successful at the local box office. Foreign journalists are not exposed to To's economic considerations when he makes a film. But To doesn't shy away from these issues with Hong Kong-based media. In addition, Western journalists tend to forget To has also made many commercially viable films, such as comedies. I believe people in Hong Kong don't use this concept of “auteur.” Johnnie To himself has denied his auteur status up until very recently. In what terms has Johnnie To been considered by Hong Kong film critics? And do they analyze his artistic merits as much as his financial successes?

Thomas Shin: Hong Kong critics perceive Johnnie To as a stylist with a strong visual flair but they also note that he is very competent with commercial films or blockbusters.

When I first knew of him fifteen years ago, he treated his films as “a kind of creative art with commercial value”. It must come from his survival instinct on the mass market. However, To obtained a worldwide reputation and has been able to go beyond the local market. He perceives films as “a kind of creative art with commercial value” a little bit different or maybe as a way to cope with the European market.

For me, and for lots of local audiences, To's and Wai Kai Fai's TV period is always our common memory. Their blockbusters or comedies are much, much better accepted than *The Mission* or *Election*. So I think you can imagine that a cultural gap has played an important part between western critics, HK critics and the audience.

In her essay, Marie Jost wrote: “*Curiously, though, opinions [in the West] on Johnnie To's films and filmmaking are literally all over the map. Each critic identifies certain favorite films as To's finest, relegating the rest to minor efforts or even unsuccessful exercises. Even a cursory look at critical opinions on To's films finds no particular pattern among critics.*” Do you consider that the situation is the same for HK film critics? Is there a consensus among the film critics about what constitutes Johnnie To's best films?

From my opinion and observation, the golden period of Johnnie To was between 1996 and 1999. *The Mission* is believed to be To's most appreciated classic.

By the way, is Johnnie To a much talked-about filmmaker in the Hong Kong film critics' circle? Is he considered a director of interest? Is he relevant? In the West, he represents of course the face of Asian cinema in general and he represents contemporary Hong Kong films in particular...

Johnnie To must be the most representative director in these past ten years in HK, both in terms of quality and quantity. Both also fuelled the industry's interest, the masses' interest and the critic's interest.

Western critics will tend to analyze and criticize To from their own perspective, sometimes forgetting about Chinese cultural elements present in To films. As much as a Western-centric analysis can be valid, it can also overlook some elements and lead to a misunderstanding of the filmmaker's intentions. I am thinking for instance about fate and karma, which seem to be always of interest to To and his colleague Wai Ka Fai. For instance *Running on Karma*, whose script seems to be based on Buddhist beliefs, has puzzled many Western critics, journalists and moviegoers. *Mad Detective* also contains some very specific ideas non-Chinese viewers might not be familiar with. As a HK film critic, can you give us a few pointers so as to appreciate or understand his films better?

Oh, I just want to say a little bit about Wai Ka Fai. Don't be confused by Wai Ka Fai's scripts. He is very strong (and experimental) with narrative structures and always wants to subvert the genre. I have written an article on Wai Ka Fai for the Hong Kong International Film Festival *Filmmaker in Focus* Catalogue [Ed.: which is dedicated to Wai Ka Fai this year; a detail of the event can be found [here](#)] that will be published at the end of March [2011]. He is a structuralist and not a humanist. So please don't use the wrong methodology to treat his work. Actually, he is very conventional in the narrative structure. Just think about his style in using opening episodes and closing episodes. He is obsessed with the life cycles of the characters and their choices under the high hand of the scriptwriter. If you see his films in this way, your mind will be clear. *Running on Karma* [shows] two ways of living due to Big's two different decisions after killing a bird! *Mad Detective* actually is "Method Detective", using a method acting technique to find the clues. Don't think too much, just feel it. *Don't Go Breaking My Heart* [Ed.: To's and Wai's 2011 comedy which opened the 35th Hong Kong International Film

Festival] is an updated variation on Wai Ka Fai's *The Shopaholics* which deals with the difficulties in making choices.

As for Johnnie To, he is a big man with a kid's heart. Sometimes, he treats his characters with a samurai spirit. He is deeply influenced by the term Wu Xia, which means a righteous samurai or swordsman, wandering in Jiang Hu. These two personas form the entire world of Johnnie To. It does not only apply to his “art films” but mostly to his commercial ones. Remember *Fat Choi Spirit*. Andy Lau is a modern martial arts master or hero (武俠 or 俠士), using mahjong as a weapon.

Vivian P.Y. Lee, A Hong Kong Scholar

“To’s films can be very impressionistic, especially when he wants to raise a philosophical or religious question but refrains from explaining too much.”

Our second interviewee was Vivian P.Y. Lee. Lee teaches in the Department of Chinese, Translation and Linguistics at the City University of Hong Kong. Her publications on modern Chinese literature and Chinese cinemas have appeared in academic journals and anthologies including Modern Chinese Literature and Culture, Journal of Chinese Cinemas, Scope and Chinese Films in Focus II. Lee is also the author of Hong Kong Cinema Since 1997, The Post-Nostalgic Imagination (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

HKCinemagic.com: Is there a consensus among the Hong Kong-based film critics and academics about what constitutes Johnnie To’s best films? Which one do you prefer?

Vivian P.Y. Lee: My impression is that in HK To’s reputation as a master of ‘action’ films began to take shape with *The Mission* (1999), and was further consolidated with the critical success of *PTU*, both films winning him the Best Director Award at the Hong Kong Film Awards (HKFA) in 2000 and 2004. His earlier films such as *The Longest Nite* and *Running Out of Time* were milestones of To’s Milkyway Image productions, but in my opinion from *The Mission* onwards To’s confidence in his personal style became increasingly visible.

I do not see the same extent of polarized opinions on the three films mentioned by Jost [in her essay] (*Running on Karma*, *Throw Down*, and *Mad Detective*). It occurs to me that these three films were quite well-received in Hong Kong, though not all of them have attained the same level of critical acclaim as *PTU* and *The Mission*. *Throw Down*, for instance, received only one nomination for best action choreography at the HKFA in 2004, but it was also the 'Film of Merit' at the Hong Kong Film Critics Society Awards in 2005. I think in general Stephen Teo's assessment of Johnnie To as an 'uneven auteur' is shared by many local critics, although the exact contours of this 'unevenness' are also a matter of individual taste and preferences.

My favourite To films (so far) are *PTU* and *Mad Detective*.

Is it possible to discuss Johnnie To's films with the notions/theories developed and used by Western academics? For instance, Andrew Grossman in his 2001 article for *Sense of Cinema*, "The Belated Auteursm of Johnnie To," has a hard time fitting To's oeuvre into the framework of either auteur theory or genre theory. Do Hong Kong-based academics use these auteur and genre film theories to define To cinema? Are there some specific theories Chinese academics have developed to discuss Chinese films in general and which are applied to Johnnie To work?

The most readable and broadly circulated work that engages with To's auteursm and genre theory would be Stephen Teo's book, *Director in Action: Johnnie To and the Hong Kong Action Film* (HKU Press, 2007). Other studies by Chinese academics on To's films may draw upon genre theory but most tend to explore To's cinematic language and visual style within the framework of the Hong Kong action film tradition, for instance, the image of the hero/gangster, brotherhood, the (postmodern) cityscape, fatalism, violence, and political allegory. Michael Ingham's book on *PTU* (HKU Press, 2009), for instance, explores the philosophical

and moral complexity of the film, paying close attention to its narrative and aesthetics.

So far I am not aware of any specific ‘theories’ developed by Chinese academics that are applied to To’s work, probably due to his ‘unevenness’, except that To’s major films do draw attention to his affiliation to film noir. On the other hand, Western critics seem to be less interested in To’s lighter side, that is, romantic comedies and melodrama where women are given a more prominent role (e.g. *Needing You* [2000], *Love on a Diet* [2001]), which have drawn more attention from Chinese or Hong Kong-based academics.

Is Johnnie To’s body of work, which is rich and very diverse, as puzzling to analyze for Hong Kong-based academics as it is for Westerners?

Not necessarily—at least for most people in HK, To’s better known films are popular because people (critics and the general audience alike) find them ‘entertaining’ in the first place, however you understand the word. HK action films invest more on visual immediacy than narrative clarity and unity; sometimes complexity is suggested but not satisfactorily explained. A film may also assume too much local knowledge to be immediately comprehensible by a Western critic. Some things are always lost in translation—even if we look at the most basic level of dialogue and subtitling. Perhaps this explains why local critics/academics sometimes are more able to absolve flaws that may appear appalling or puzzling to Western critics. Your question raises an important question about cross-cultural reception that might shed light on the different intellectual paradigms that inform critical studies on To, and others.

As a Hong Kong-based film scholar, can you give us a few tips to appreciate To films better?

To's narrative can be over-economical and some of his films try to balance philosophical content (such as karma, fate, and chance) with commercial elements, and this can result in inconsistencies and 'puzzles' in the films. To's films can be very impressionistic, too, especially when he wants to raise a philosophical or religious question but refrains from explaining too much. I think—personally (and not necessarily academically!)—one can see To's films, especially those mentioned above, as experiments and explorations into different possibilities of making 'Hong Kong (action) films', for his films do make a difference to the visual style and interpretation of recurrent generic subject matter (brotherhood, heroism, masculinity, violence) that have come to represent the genre to both the local and international critical community.

Sebastian Yim, A Hong Kong Postgraduate

“Local critics, like their western counterparts, like to interpret To’s films in terms of cultural politics and locality.”

Sebastian Yim is the third person we interviewed. Yim is a postgraduate student at the Department of Comparative Literature of the Hong Kong University. His dissertation is, as he puts it, “a critical study of post-1997 hegemonic masculinity in HK cinema.”

HKCinemagic.com: Marie Jost wrote in her essay: *“The fanboys had embraced To’s films beginning with 1993’s Heroic Trio and then early Milkyway Image movies such as A Hero Never Dies right through to recent works like Exiled. The critics and festival programmers discovered To in the early 2000s, beginning with The Mission, and have been particularly engaged with his more personal recent films such as Election 1 & 2, Mad Detective and Sparrow. (...) The academy first showed an interest in the films of Johnnie To around 2005.”* Was it the same in Hong Kong? Have academics in Hong Kong started to show an interest in To very late? Was it only after he was recognized as a major Asian filmmaker overseas, received awards and was celebrated in countless retrospectives and festivals?

Sebastian Yim: As you might know, academics in Hong Kong, if they are interested in HK cinema at all, are mostly trained in the West. So I personally would say they are not really far removed to the ‘West’ in terms of critical agenda

and scholarly interest. As Jost comprehensively shows, those who seriously engage with To's films with scholarly attention are mostly the so-called 'non-locals.' Quite unfortunately other scholars well-versed in HK culture have not paid much attention to To (yet).

However, things are not all that bad. There is a book missing in Jost's account, as far as I remember. It is titled *Milkyway Image, Beyond Imagination : Wai Ka-fai + Johnnie To + Creative Team (1996-2005)*, to which Western scholars like David Bordwell, Peter Rist, Stephen Teo [and also HK scholars] have contributed articles. It's a book edited by a local cultural critic called Lawrence Pun, and the book is bilingual, making its accessible to both local and global readers. You can see the content [here](#).

About local critics' favorite films, I can say the choice of Hong Kong Film Critics Society is the most representative. They have chosen *The Mission*, *Election 1* and *Election 2* as the best film of the year in 1999, 2005 and 2006 respectively. To is named the best director with *A Hero Never Dies* in 1998, *The Mission* in 1999, *PTU* in 2003, and *Exiled* in 2006. Wai Ka Fai is named the best scriptwriter in 2003, 2006, 2009 with *Running on Karma*, *Mad Detective*, and *Written By* respectively. Here is a link to the [Hong Kong Film Critics Society webpage in Chinese](#)

It seems that there is no consensus among the film critics about what constitutes Johnnie To's best films in the West. Do you consider that the situation to be similar for HK film critics

I think it's the same. Yet in terms of local award recognition, some films do stand out, like *Election 1* and 2 and *The Mission*.

Is it possible to discuss Johnnie To's films with the notions Western academics use. For instance, Andrew Grossman in his 2001 article for *Sense of Cinema*, "The Belated Auteurs of Johnnie To," has a hard time fitting To's oeuvre into the framework of either auteur theory or genre theory. Do Hong Kong-based academics use those notions of auteur and genre films to define To cinema?

I am afraid the Hong Kong based academics are not serious with To yet.

Vivian Lee's book on post 1997 Hong Kong cinema (mentioned in Jost's article) is the most visible effort. Of course they use the auteur theory, after all film criticism or film as a form of art originates in the West.

Local critics, like their western counterparts, like to interpret To's films in terms of cultural politics and locality.

Fate and karma seem to always be of interest for To and his colleague Wai Ka Fai. For instance *Running on Karma*, which seems to follow Buddhist beliefs have puzzled many Western critics and moviegoers. *Mad Detective* also contains some very specific ideas non-Chinese viewers might not be familiar with. As a Hong Kong-based film enthusiast and academic, can you give us a few tips to understand his films better?

This is certainly beyond my capacity. I have to say Buddhism is not as prevalent and dominant in China as in, for instance, Thailand. If you really ask the local audience, I guess they will say: "it's all entertainment!" And I have to say the notion of fate and karma puzzle modern people, from the East or the West.

Marie Jost wrote: "*Given the inconclusive and fragmentary picture that has emerged from 10 years of examining To's movies in the context of genre filmmaking and/or auteur theory, perhaps the time has come to move on and to take a fresh look at his work and attempt to discern different patterns, ones more suggestive of fruitful avenues for future inquiry.*"

Do you agree with this statement and what would be the patterns and avenues a Hong Kong based critic or academic would explore?

I cannot predict, of course! The statement is a good one because To is still transforming and producing films. Indeed, Wai Ka Fai, alongside To is also very highly regarded locally as a film talent. This year's HK International Film Festival features Wai Ka Fai as a director and scriptwriter [in focus]! So I think they have somehow moved beyond the limits of auteur (though still trapped in it), by taking a good look at scriptwriters, no longer thinking that the director is everything.

Ross Chen, A Hong Kong Film Buff

“More often than not, there’s a method to the madness.”

Ross Chen was our fourth interviewee. Chen is the founder of LoveHKFilm.com, a website in English language in which he has reviewed hundreds of films since 2002. His texts signed under his nom de plume Kozo are considered insightful and highly entertaining by Hong Kong film buffs. Chen is also Managing Editor for online Asian Entertainment retailer YesAsia.com and writes for various Asian film festivals and events both local and foreign, including the Udine Far East Film Festival, the Hong Kong Asian Film Festival and the Asian Film Awards.

HKCinemagic.com: To is celebrated in the West for his gangster films, such as *The Mission*, *PTU*, *Exiled* or *Election*. How are these films received and estimated locally, compared to more commercial efforts such as *Yesterday Once More*, *Wu Yen*, *Love on a Diet*, *Running on Karma*, *Needing You*, etc.? Do local moviegoers or fans take Johnnie To’s gangsters flicks seriously? Is he well respected in Hong Kong because he has gained success and awards overseas?

Ross Chen: From what I understand, regular audiences do enjoy and respect Johnnie To’s crime films as examples of quality filmmaking. However, their popularity is nothing compared to the commercial efforts that you’ve mentioned, simply because those films belong to more popular genres and, more importantly, they feature very big stars.

As a filmmaker, Johnnie To gets a large measure of respect, in that his films are covered by the media seriously – or, at least, not in the same fast food, gossip-oriented way that other films are. His respect has come from many things: his previous TVB career, plus also the acclaim he's received. His international popularity of course factors in, as it creates news, but his success has been quite great in Asia too, especially with the Golden Horse Awards and the Hong Kong Film Awards. His local and overseas acclaim have sort of fed each other.

Western critics will tend to analyze and criticize To from their own perspective, sometimes forgetting about Chinese cultural elements present in To films. As a HK film enthusiast and critic, can you give us a few quick tips to appreciate his films better?

Johnnie To does have many Chinese cultural elements in his work, but I think it's not such a big deal when he doesn't work with Wai Ka-Fai. Appreciating Johnnie To's films for their culture is actually easier than one would think, as other than a few examples his themes are more universal. Brotherhood, honor, etc., this stuff is not unique to Chinese culture. Some things do require some specific knowledge, e.g. the depiction of triad societies in *Election* or even *Exiled*, but those things are easily understood. It's very much one-way – you see it, you read about it, then you understand it.

However, when To works with Wai Ka-Fai, the need for understanding culture gets far greater. Both enjoy irony, but To seems to handle that visually and without the same amount of layers that Wai Ka-Fai does. Wai Ka-Fai attempts so many levels with character, theme and story that it's no surprise that he's more hit-and-miss than Johnnie To is. When combined, the two are amazing, as To realizes Wai's ideas visually. That's when their work is most powerful – when the images and ideas meet wordlessly. I think Milkyway's work is vastly superior when the two work together than when they work separately. And even then, I'd

argue that Wai's solo career apex (*Too Many Ways To Be No1*) outshines any of To's solo work, with the possible exception of the *Election* movies.

As for tips, the biggest one is to look out for Wai Ka-Fai. If he's listed on To's work, then one should look a little harder than if it's just Johnnie To. Buddhism, karma, etc., they are present in a lot of their joint work – even the romantic comedies. And local culture matters too. I personally think *Needing You* is a great, great movie, and a lot of it has to do with how To and Wai capture local culture so well. Office politics, family, doing business – this stuff is portrayed so well in that film that it gives the film a depth, color and truth that you simply won't find in, say, *Don't Go Breaking My Heart*.

In the end, the biggest tip I have is research, research, research. A viewer can learn a lot from watching Johnnie To and Wai Ka-Fai's films. If one of their films doesn't make sense, a person should do some research or some reading before immediately dismissing it. More often than not, there's a method to the madness.

When a new Johnnie To film is released in Hong Kong, do HK critics analyze his new output on its own or do they place it in the context of To's body of work, as Western critics would do? In the West To's films are not necessarily released in chronological order and sometimes they arrive several years after they were released in HK. Western critics have very little context to write on the films. On the contrary, in HK there is the advertisement for the film release, the buzz around it and To's radio, TV and magazine interviews to support the film marketing as well as the promotional activities attended by the stars of the film. And of course the gossip magazines. Do these elements influence you a lot when you write a critic?

Critical analysis works the same way in both the West and the East. You have the critics who place Johnnie To's films in context and then there are those who handle everything as a one-off. Even then, contextualizing To's work has many pitfalls. Critics both east and west like to group his crime films while ignoring the comedies or romances. It's very sad, actually, as a lot of To can be seen in those films. It's not like he's making garbage when he's not making a crime film, but too frequently, critics will act like those films are beneath mention or notice.

For myself, I factor in whatever information I have when writing a review of a Johnnie To film – or any other filmmaker for that matter. Previous work of course matters, as does information about the stars, their casting, the subject matter, or even the industry forces behind the film's production. All of this stuff makes a difference, as it helps play a part in whatever the intentions the filmmakers had when making their film. It also plays a part in audience expectations.

For western film critics, their context for To is largely related to genre and Internet reputation. Also, nowadays western film critics have the benefit of English language news sites for Asian films. The context may be slanted too much towards crime films, but in the end, there are many ways to review a film and no way is the real "correct" way. What's wrong is to not be honest or fair, like dismissing a film simply based on its genre. Or, you shouldn't claim authority when you really don't have any. Like saying that a film is "The best film Johnnie To has ever made" when you've only seen five or six of his films. But both western and eastern film critics make those mistakes.

As a Hong Kong-based film enthusiast, what is your favourite Johnnie To's film and why?

It's hard to choose one favorite Johnnie To film, as it ignores a film's individual merit and skews it towards my personal likes and dislikes. I'll try though.

If I had to choose To's best solo film, I'd say it's either *Election 2* or *The Mission*. The former is more mature and deals with local politics and culture, while the latter is a complete, enjoyable film that doesn't require lots of extra knowledge or thinking to get. Both are very well realized, though.

For a Johnnie To and Wai Ka-Fai collaboration, I'd probably go with *Needing You* or *Running On Karma*. The former is much more enjoyable and develops its standard romcom characters in unique cinematic ways. For me, the latter is great because it delivers a very prosaic cinema message – forgiveness, being the better man, etc. – and does so in a very compelling way.

Generally, I think films don't have much new to say anymore, and that it's all about HOW the filmmakers say those things that make the films special. Johnnie To and Wai Ka-Fai really know how to repackage common cinema tropes to make them feel new and interesting.

When you go to the cinema to watch a Johnnie To film, do you have a lot of expectations? Are they usually fulfilled?

Of course there are expectations when seeing a Johnnie To film! If I respect or admire someone, then I expect a great deal from them. That said, the expectations are not always fulfilled, but there are many factors that contribute to that. I think Johnnie To tries – perhaps not always successfully, but it's clear that he's trying SOMETHING when he makes his films. As such, I'm always willing to give his films a chance.

Can Tse, A Hong Kong Film Enthusiast

“Wai Ka Fai is about the story, while Johnnie To is always about visuals.”

*Can Tse was the fifth and the last person interviewed. Tse is a Hong Kong-based film buff who majored in Cinema and TV at the School of Communication of the Hong Kong Baptist University. Tse focused her studies on Johnnie To at a time his company, Milkyway Image, was getting some traction. In 1999, Tse had the chance to watch *The Mission* at the university before its public release and to participate in a talk with Johnnie To. She has followed To's career closely ever since. For two consecutive years, Tse worked in the Operation Team of the Hong Kong International Film Festival for the duration of the festival. Aside from Johnnie To and Wai Ka-fai, Tse is also fond of the cinema of Jeff Lau; Wim Wenders, Ingmar Bergman, Ozu Yasujiro, Hou Hsiao Hsien, Theo Angelopoulos and Abbas Kiarostami.*

HKCinemagic.com: As a Hong Kong-based fan, what is your favourite Johnnie To's film and why?

Can Tse: Personally, I love *Running on Karma* most. It is a well-balanced film commercially, content-wise and aesthetically. But its success has to be attributed also to the scenario written by Wai Ka-fai. After all, To and Wai co-directorial works really have a distinctiveness if you compare them with the individual projects of Johnnie To. Among To's sole projects, I like *The Mission* the most, which can show To as an auteur director.

Do you enjoy the gangster films Johnnie To made (*Breaking News, Election, The Mission, PTU...*) as much as the female-oriented comedies with Sammi Cheng and Andy Lau?

I love both. Obviously, the female-oriented comedies are made for mainstream audience. Of course the directors managed to keep their signature style with very good stories, but still those comedies are not that ambitious in achieving anything cinematically.

To is celebrated in the West for his gangster films, such as *The Mission, PTU, Exiled* or *Election*. How are these films received and estimated locally, compared to more commercial efforts such as *Yesterday Once More, Wu Yen, Love on a Diet, Running on Karma, Needing You*, etc.? Do local moviegoers or fans take Johnnie To's gangsters films seriously? Is he well respected in Hong Kong because he has gained success and awards overseas?

If you mean box office takings as an index to measure the popularity of a film, the popularity of To's films really varied a lot. Say *The Mission*, which is one of his first completed auteur projects, was critically acclaimed, but did very poorly at the box office. *PTU* and *Exiled* were not well received in the local box office too. *Election* was an exception; its official selection at Cannes really made some noise in HK. Also, the extreme violence depicted in the picture and the mysterious side, rituals of gangster (*Election* was rated Category III in HK - for only audience aged above 18 – due to the detailed description of gangster rituals) also drew public attention. For general audience, Johnnie To's gangsters films of course were well-known, with lots of awards, highly recommended by critics and enjoying overseas success, but not very well received usually. They were somehow marked as movie fans stuff rather than blockbusters. But To is still one of the most respected

filmmakers in HK now, with lots of commercially successful films but also he is highly acclaimed by critics with his smaller-scale personal projects.

There are many Chinese cultural elements present in To films. I am thinking of fate and karma that seem to be always of interest for To, and his colleague Wai Ka Fai. For instance *Running on Karma*, which seems to follow Buddhist beliefs have puzzled many Western critics and moviegoers. *Mad Detective* also contains some very specific ideas non-Chinese viewers might not be familiar with. As a HK film fan, can you give us a few tips to appreciate or understand To films better?

One of the most important reasons I like Johnnie To and Wai Ka Fai's films is that their films are really "Chinese." So, you got the point, I do think Westerners may have difficulties in understanding their films thoroughly, especially for stories by Wai Ka Fai. I read an interview of To before, some critics asked him about the meaning of pistols or guns in his films, mentioning they signified the male genitals. You know what To said? He said, there is nothing to do with gender thing. He loves samurai films, and in the 21st century, pistols and guns are just like swords of samurais in the old days. That's it! I have to say, Johnnie To and Wai Ka Fai were not film graduate. They learned how to make films at the TVB, the local TV broadcaster, learning the most basic techniques to tell story by images, but they are no film scholar, and they won't play with difficult theories or things like that. Their films are straightforward. It is especially true in their comedies in which you can see plenty of local specific elements and oriental thinking. So to understand their films, don't over-interpret.

A note: for the fate and karma thing, it's absolutely Wai Ka Fai's style but not Johnnie To's. Of course Johnnie To does agree a lot with Wai's thinking, but you can see in To's sole projects that it is mentioned much less, and that he uses a bit

more black humour and stylish cinematic techniques. Wai is always about the story, while To is always about visuals.

In HK, you are in contact with the advertisements for the film release, the buzz around it and To's radio, TV and magazine interviews to support the film marketing as well as the promotional activities attended by the cast. And of course there are the gossip magazines. Do these elements influence you a lot to go and watch a Johnnie To film or when you discuss about his films with your friends?

In fact, Johnnie To is one of the local filmmakers who tried to stay away from the gossip thing. He seldom accepts interviews, unlike other directors. His cast, most of the time, are not big stars. OK, Richie Jen and Simon Yam are famous artists, but they are not this kind of artists that draw gossips. So Johnnie To's films are quite insulated from this type of media. What about his commercial films, you may say, such as the comedies with Andy Lau and Sammi Cheng? They do draw a lot of gossips, and of course, it's a kind of promotional strategy with the casting too. So you can see why Johnnie To never cast big big stars for his non-commercial works.



*Johnnie To talking to journalists in Paris, March 2008.
Photo © David-Olivier Vidouze for HKCinemagic.com.*

Conclusion to the Addendum by Marie Jost (April 2011)

Five individuals in Hong Kong, amongst them critics, cinephiles and film scholars, were questioned by Thomas Podvin, Editor of HKCinemagic.com, to determine how Johnnie To is viewed in his native Hong Kong. All were asked how To is regarded in Hong Kong, what might be considered his seminal works, and the relationship of his output as a filmmaker to the local cultural context. When taken as a whole, the responses present an alternate view of Johnnie To that in several ways acts as a corrective to the prevailing view of To in the West.

There was a general consensus that it was necessary to look at all of Johnnie To's output—including the comedies and the romances—in constructing a picture of To as a filmmaker. In Hong Kong, many of To's pictures have relied on popular genres (most notably comedy and romance), featured big stars and generating big box office, which in turn spells big popular impact. The pictures that are so well regarded by Western and local Hong Kong critics, the movies that win To his film awards-- crime dramas and gangster pictures—are much less popular with local audiences and do not on their own present a complete picture of how To is viewed in his home territory nor his impact as a filmmaker.

Rather surprising was the acknowledgment by several respondents of their fond memories of Johnnie To and Wai Ka Fai (To's frequent collaborator at Milkyway Image) from their time at TVB, a local Hong Kong television station. The context for appreciating the work of filmmakers, at least in Hong Kong, can extend beyond their work in film and encompass their television work as well. (This is not unique to To and Wai. Other Hong Kong filmmakers of some repute—for example Patrick Tam and Ann Hui-- worked in television before making feature

films and their television work is considered alongside their film work in an assessment of their career as filmmakers by Hong Kong critics and film scholars.)

Equally significant was the across the board acknowledgement of the importance of Wai Ka Fai, To's frequent collaborator, and his significant contribution to the To-Wai collaborations. Because Wai's contribution in joint projects with To is confined to scriptwriting, he has been less prominent in discussions of To in the West. The respondents acknowledge that there is a density and cultural specificity to the scripts that Wai contributes in these joint projects, such as *Running on Karma*, *Mad Detective* or even the romantic comedy *Needing You*, that make them less accessible to Western critics and scholars than the more visually driven To solo efforts. The view in Hong Kong is that this is a partnership that must be taken seriously. Wai Ka Fai contributes the ideas, characters and storytelling, while Johnnie To visualizes what Wai creates as a scriptwriter. For several respondents, the works produced by this creative partnership are greater than the sum of their individual parts. An acknowledgement of the high esteem with which Wai Ka Fai is regarded in Hong Kong film circles is the fact that the 2011 Hong Kong International Film Festival Filmmaker in Focus was Wai Ka Fai. As one critic stated: in Hong Kong at least, they are looking beyond auteur theory to take a serious look at scriptwriting, and acknowledge that the director may not be the be-all-and-end-all in cinema.



Johnnie To and Wai Ka Fai at the Udine Far East Film Festival in 2008.

Photo © Frédéric Ambroisine.

PART III

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Books on Johnnie To

Here are three books entirely dedicated to Johnnie To and his films.



1. *Milkyway Image, Beyond Imagination*
Wai Ka-fai + Johnnie To + Creative Team (1996-2005),
edited by Lawrence Pun.

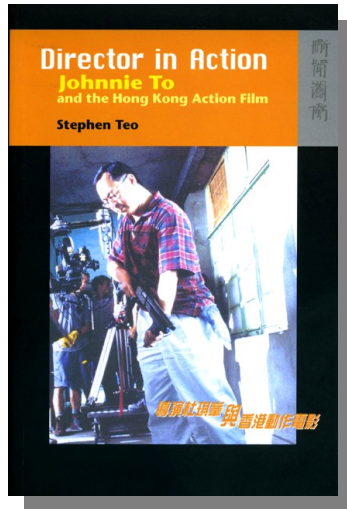
1. **Lawrence Pun (editor), Milkyway Image, Beyond Imagination -- Wai Ka-fai + Johnnie To + Creative Team (1996-2005)** (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 2006), in English and in Chinese. Essays from foreign and Chinese scholars as well as cast and crew interviews.

-Interviews with Wai Ka-fai, Lau Ching-wan, Simon Yam, Cheng Siu-keung, Andy Lau, Chung Chi-wing, Lam Suet, Bruce Yu, Yau Nai-hoi and Johnnie To, and

-Essays by David Bordwell, Peter Rist, Lawrence Pun, Chuck Stephens, Katherine Spring, Lorenzo Codelli, Li Cheuk-to, Jeff Smith, Bono Lee, Stephen Teo and Shu Kei.

Full content available [here](#).

More details on this book [here](#).



2. *Director in Action: Johnnie To and the Hong Kong Action Film* by Stephen Teo.



3. *Johnnie To-Kei-fung's PTU* by Michael Ingham.

2. **Stephen Teo, Director in Action: Johnnie To and the Hong Kong Action Film** (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007). In English.

See details on the book here [here](#). See book review here [here](#).

3. **Michael Ingham, Johnnie To-Kei-fung's PTU** (Hong Kong: Hong University Press, 2009). In English. See details on the book [here](#) and review [here](#).

Appendix B

Johnnie To's and Wai Ka Fai's films

-Wai Ka Fai (W) and Johnnie To (J) common projects:

Don't Go Breaking My Heart, 2011, W: Director, Producer, Writer; T: Director, Producer

Vengeance, 2009, W: Producer, Writer, T: Director, Producer

Mad Detective, 2007, W: Director, Producer, Writer, T: Director, Producer

Love For All Seasons, 2003, W: Director, Producer, Writer, T: Director, Producer

Running On Karma, 2003, W: Director, Producer, Writer, T: Director, Producer

Turn Left Turn Right, 2003, W: Director, Producer, Writer, T: Director, Producer

Fat Choi Spirit, 2002, W: Director, Producer, Writer, T: Director, Producer

My Left Eye Sees Ghosts, 2002, W: Director, Producer, Writer, T: Director, Producer

Fulltime Killer, 2001, W: Director, Producer, Writer, T: Director, Producer

Love On A Diet, 2001, W: Director, Producer, Writer, T: Director, Producer

Wu Yen, 2001, W: Director, Producer, Writer, T: Director, Producer

Help !!!, 2000, W: Director, Producer, Writer, T: Director, Producer

Needing You, 2000, W: Director, Producer, Writer, T: Director, Producer

Where A Good Man Goes, 1999, W: Producer, Original Story, T: Director, Producer

A Hero Never Dies, 1998, W: Producer, T: Director, Producer

The Longest Nite, 1998, W: Producer, T: Producer (uncredited director)

Intruder, 1997, W: Producer, T: Producer

The Odd One Dies, 1997, Producer, Writer, T: Producer

Too Many Ways To Be No. 1, 1997, W: Director, Writer, T: Producer

The Story Of My Son, 1990, W: Writer, T: Director, Writer

-List of [Johnnie To films](#).

-List of [Wai Ka Fai films](#).

About the Author

Marie Jost received her doctorate in art history from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is a Hong Kong film enthusiast, an ardent Leslie Cheung fan, and flamenco and world music aficionado. Ms. Jost currently resides in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, U.S.A. and is questioning the wisdom of trying to learn Cantonese on her own.



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The Rise of Johnnie To
By Marie Jost
With an addendum by Thomas Podvin
