



PLANET HONG KONG

POPULAR CINEMA AND THE ART OF ENTERTAINMENT

DAVID BORDWELL

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PLOTS, SLACK AND STRETCHED

By the standards of festival cinema, Hong Kong's approach to narrative seems obstinately naive. While the West was watching Angelopoulos' *The Travelling Players* (1975), Ruiz's *La vocación suspensiva* (1977), Kieślowski's *Blind Chance* (1981), Greenaway's *The Draughtsmen's Contract* (1982), Carax's *Boy Meets Girl* (1983), von Trier's *The Element of Crime* (1984), and Varda's *Sans toit ni loi* (*Vagabond*, 1985), this popular cinema clung to embarrassingly straightforward, even slapdash storytelling. The typical Hong Kong movie, as Geoffrey O'Brien puts it, proceeds by an "accretion of incidents" that yields an "improvisatory messiness."¹ The chronic weakness of Hong Kong film, says critic Li Cheuk-to, is "its inability to handle plot effectively."²

Which may make this tradition all the more appealing to those film scholars who argue that any mass-entertainment movie is a grab bag of appeals. In place of overarching coherence, they suggest, we should look for a tension between "spectacle" and "narrative." If we think of a story as a chain of causes and effects, actions and reactions, then what do we do with those moments when the story seems to halt and we are forced simply to watch and listen? The musical serves as a prototype: the plot becomes a clothesline to which brightly colored song-and-dance numbers are pinned. Once you start to distinguish between narrative and spectacle in this way, all movies start to look like musicals. Isn't a fight or a chase, a string of gags, a vast set, or a breathtaking landscape spectacle? What about those lingering close-ups of stars, or credits sequences with engaging music? At the limit, all popular film becomes a "cinema of attractions," to invoke Tom Gunning's influential term, and the plot becomes simply a pretext for the real *raison d'être*, the parade of splendors.³

Sensuous appeals are surely part of popular cinema, but the narrative/spectacle dichotomy is probably not the best way to understand them. For one thing, the split presupposes a fairly austere conception of narrative. In

fact, storytelling is going on constantly in a popular film, and moments of spectacle are usually integral parts of the plot. Lovers express their attraction in "Dancing in the Dark" no less than in a rapid-fire banter; a lengthy close-up of Marlene Dietrich is a narrative event, marking her as a character inclined toward sultry contemplation. Car chases, gunfights, and explosions—all frequently invoked as signs of pure spectacle—develop the action, test the heroes, complicate the villain's plans, often kill off minor characters. Even if some parts of a film seem detachable, such as a string of gags that goes nowhere in particular, we should recall that stories also need padding and stretching. A folk tale incorporates three brothers or three wishes or three tests of the hero, even though not much of the point would be lost if there were only two or one. The literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky called this a "stepped" structure, or "deceleration."⁴ Any storyteller must fill out the story to the proper length, and so assorted materials—repetitions, gags, digressions, delays—are stitched in, more or less tightly. Instead of relying on the spectacle/narrative duality, we might better presuppose a continuum running between tightly woven plots and looser, more episodic ones.

Akin to the idea that popular cinema bounces between narrative and spectacle is the belief that in "postclassical" Hollywood (that is, since the 1960s or so) coherent storytelling has collapsed. Critics of a postmodernist stripe like this view because it coincides with what they take to be the rise of merchandising, distracted and interruptive viewing habits, and a general breakdown in our understanding of the modern world. To fragmentation of the audience and fragmentation of experience corresponds a fragmentation of the text.⁵ One might then argue for Hong Kong cinema as exemplary of this postmodern chaos.

As so often, though, a close look at the films raises problems. Usually what the postmodernist critic takes as a fragmented film is just an episodic one, and there is nothing new about episodic narratives. Further, not all of today's film stories are particularly episodic. Many recent films, like *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) and *Groundhog Day* (1993), display the sort of structural felicities to be found in *The General* (1927), *His Girl Friday* (1940), and *The Pajama Game* (1957). For some time, Hollywood movies have possessed more unity than they seem to need. It is as if filmmakers set up subtle echoes, balances, and refrains not to enhance thematic meaning (often the film's significance is not deepened by the patterning) but for the pleasure of creating an intricate design, the challenge of slipping in one more detail, and the desire to display skill, if only to peers. It may be that Hollywood, largely middle-class in its orientation, has absorbed enough canons of high art to prize the unities celebrated in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetics.

Granted, most Hong Kong cinema has yet to achieve Hollywood's degree of craft cleverness at the level of plotting. Yet it isn't useful to insist on

these films as casual assemblages of narrative-spectacle or postmodern fragments. Their approach to storytelling, simple and insouciant as it may look, rests upon some powerful and long-standing principles of construction.

Since form often follows format, size limitations can govern structure. The short story is built differently from the serialized novel. Hong Kong filmmakers standardized film length at 90 to 100 minutes, or nine to ten reels. This maximized theater turnover, allowing audiences to be hustled in and out at two-hour intervals across a day. As we've seen, filmmakers took the nine reels as units of plot construction, so that the first reel would grab the audience's interest, the fourth reel would start a significant line of action, the sixth or seventh would provide another major turning point, and the last two or three reels would yield a protracted climax and conclusion, leaving the audience with a strong final impression. Sometimes the template was conceived of as a four-part structure, with beginning (reels 1-3, all major characters established), development (4-6, main story gets going and teaches a crisis about an hour in), and climax (7-9, the final half-hour).⁶ These principles of construction also govern "art movies" like *Boat People* (1982) and *Rouge* (1988). Although some filmmakers claim not to follow the reel-by-reel formula, many still do. Kirk Wong, for instance, asks his screenwriters to prepare a nine-paragraph plot breakdown, each paragraph devoted to a ten-minute reel.⁷

Conventional plot anatomy is quite visible in Jackie Chan's *Project A* (1982). The first reel introduces Jackie as a cheerful coast guard officer and sets up the main problem: pirates are roaming the seas around Hong Kong, and the British rulers are wringing their hands while the coast guard and the police squabble over jurisdiction. The reel ends with a comic barroom brawl, establishing Jackie's quarrel with Yuen Biao, the police chief's son. Reel two offers lower-key exposition, showing the pirates' Hong Kong collaborator hiding in the British private club and introducing Sammo Hung, the shifty comman. Reel three, more comedy, with Jackie assigned to the police force and doing all he can to make parade-ground life miserable for Yuen.

Not until reel four does the main action kick into gear, when Jackie and Yuen join forces to invade the club and capture the collaborator. Jackie throws down his badge in disgust at police timidity and runs into Sammo, with whom he hatches a plot to capture the rest of the gang. In reels five and six, Jackie and Sammo try to swindle the gang. They botch the job, which leads to a sustained chase-and-fight sequence. Most viewers find this the most engaging stretch of the film (Fig. 7.1), but with respect to the main action it serves largely to fill out the format.



7.1 Jackie Chan dangles from a clock tower in *Project A*.

Project A's major twist comes on schedule in reel seven: the pirates seize a British ship and kidnap the governor, and Jackie is put in charge of the rescue mission. He disguises himself as the pirates' local contact and leads Sammo and Yuen to the pirates' island. Reels eight and nine present the siege on the lair, the final protracted battle with the pirate chieftain, and a quick epilogue showing Jackie and company on a raft, with the British captives padding them back home.

Hong Kong's reel-by-reel template permits vivid curtain-raisers. *Aces Go Places* (1982), a prototype of modern construction, opens with the hero cheerfully pulling off a death-defying jewel heist that initiates the whole plot. Sometimes, however, the opening scene may have little relation to the action that follows. For example, at the start of *The Dead* and *The Deadly* (1982) a comic visitation from a ghost establishes the Sammo Hung character as good-hearted if meddling and sets up a key motif, but the ghost and the unfaithful wife he catches in *flagrante delicto* do not affect the main plot.

The nine-reel format also permits judicious padding. Any scriptwriter knows the problem of using up one's ideas too quickly and having the plot peter out in the second or third act. But if you treat minutes eleven through thirty as exposition and filler, you can insert the first major twist far enough along to build a solid story in the time remaining. In other words, padding is better placed sooner than later. So comic situations can be exploited at length, as in *The Dead* and *the Deadly*, when the entire third reel is devoted to Sammo Hung's antics with a corpse; the fourth reel gets the main plot going. In *Gun Men* (1988), the third reel consists of the aftermath of a fight, the mourning for a slain officer, and the administrative shake-up of the police force. Only in the fourth reel does Ding reunite with his army buddies, recruit them to the force, and launch his crusade against the opium dealers. The comedy *All's Well Ends Well* (1992) sets up

its plotlines in the first three reels before the primary situations emerge: a husband installs his mistress in his house in order to defy his wife, while his brothers become involved with other women.

Very often, right after the fourth reel we find more filler. In *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1987) the fourth reel presents a major turning point. The demon controlling Nie Xiaojian demands that she kill her lover Ning Caichen so that in three days she may marry the Master of the Black Mountain. By contrast, the fifth reel consists mostly of extended riffs: the old swordsman's frenzied rap in praise of Taoism and swordplay, followed by the demon Lao Lao's claiming another victim and a lyrical song montage recapitulating scenes we've already seen. The sixth reel recovers the story thread when Xiaojian tells Caichen she's a ghost, mistaken identities are cleared up, and the swordsman proposes to use Caichen as bait to catch the demon. Alternatively, the middle reels can accumulate reversals and miniclimaxes. In the decisive fourth reel of *She Shoots Straight* (1990), the policemen confront the main villain for the first time and kill his partner. This precipitates his act of vengeance in killing Tsung-pao in reel five, which also includes a poignant scene of the fallen cop's wife and sister concealing his death from his mother on her birthday.

Cinema City encouraged filmmakers to enliven each scene with special effects, fights, chases, and comedy bits, color-coding each on a reel-by-reel chart. If a scene did not have at least one colored bar, Clifton Ko recalls, it was punched up or dropped.⁸ All of these factors, someone might suggest, involve breaking up "narrative" (the story line) with freestanding "spectacle." We get more exarces, though, by analyzing this practice as a formula for episodic construction. Screenwriters seem to have had no guidelines for motivating the middle climaxes or the attractions that pack each reel, so the plots tend not to develop long-running chains of action/reaction, with goals formed, blocked, recast, and fulfilled. Instead, as in *Project A* and *A Chinese Ghost Story*, the plot consists of short-range, fairly closed-off strings of scenes. As a result, complications get resolved section rather than converging at a single climax. At the end of reel four of *Skinny Tiger and Fat Dragon* (1990), the cop partners apparently solve a drug case. Reel five takes us through their vacation in Singapore, where they decide to quit the force and open a karaoke bar. But in reel six they run into the kingpin they captured earlier, and their pursuit simply resumes.

Because plot phases tend to halt and restart, they are often stiched together by coincidences. Chance meetings, that old favorite of popular narrative, are the principal linking devices. In *My Heart Is That Eternal Rose* (1989), a woman becomes the mistress of a triad boss; unknown to her, her former boyfriend has become the boss's hitman. They meet again on the street just after he's fulfilled a contract. In *Hero* (1997), the man who is thrown off a bridge and left to drown is rescued by a passing fishing boat; his former lover happens to be living on the boat. Here, as so often in the

adventure tradition, luck helps the hero. The bad guy is likely to run out of bullets at a fortunate moment.

Some Hong Kong critics would trace episodic plotting back to the moralistic Cantonese films of the postwar era,⁹ but it may also be that such plots spontaneously revive much older strategies. Piecemeal plotting is characteristic of popular narrative, from oral epics to pulp adventure stories. Most kung-fu films resemble folktales, centering on barely motivated fights, near-repetitions of events, a hierarchy of subsidiary villains, and flagrantly patched-in comic interludes. Perhaps vernacular narrative in general tends toward episodic construction. For most audiences across history the intensity of strong moments has evidently counted for more than niceties of overall architecture. Madeleine Doran describes a tendency in Elizabethan drama to "organize events around several episodic centers, with the connections falling slack between them"—a good description of most Hong Kong movies.¹⁰ Hollywood's concern for detailed motivation on many fronts probably makes it unusual among popular cinemas.

The popular origins of Hong Kong plotting also emerge in screenwriters' fondness for the disguises, cross-dressings, pranks, and foiled schemes beloved of many narrative traditions, from commedia dell'arte to silent cinema. Misunderstandings and mistakes of timing are put to both comic and dramatic uses. There are folkloric tests of ability, trials of strength and will, and challenges from strangers, not just in the martial-arts movies but also in the gambling cycle, where games of chance become dazzling set pieces. Loose construction can set off a moment vividly, spring surprises through unprepared-for events, and even yield a peculiar sense of realism, in which life becomes just one damned thing after another. In *Lifeline* (1997), the daily routines of the firefighters are interrupted by abrupt accidents—a perilously hanging elevator, a car wreck—and by the personal problems plaguing each member of the team. There is a culminating moment in which all cooperate to conquer and survive a catastrophic fire, but the rescue effort is merely one more incident in their lives; it does not, as it might in a Hollywood film, solve their problems.

Accordingly, the central character may not trace out the "character arc" of the Hollywood hero. Whereas the march of events in *The Untouchables* teaches Elliot Ness to be more flexible and pragmatic, *Gun Men* simply assigns Ding to root out corruption and avenge his colleague's death. The breathless energy of *Speed* (1994) may recall Jackie Chan, but the plot sketches a psychological maturing rare in Hong Kong films: Jack (Keanu Reeves) must give up impulsive bravado and learn to outthink his adversary. The centrality of revenge to the Hong Kong action movie assures a rhythm of blow and counterblow that doesn't require character change. The hero, clinging to his mission, must fight for his pride (and sometimes his principles) without radically questioning himself. And the luck that attends the hero's efforts—the chance meetings, the empty pistol chamber—

becomes a kind of poetic justice, as if the accidents of the world naturally favored his unswerving refusal to change his personality.

Episodic construction favors tonal ruptures. Vulgar comedy can be slapped alongside pathos or suspense. The opening of Wong Jing's *God of Gamblers' Return* (1994) shows the murder of Ko Chun's wife and child, which sets him on the path of vengeance. But once he arrives in the People's Republic the situations become comic, with chases involving crotch jokes, garden shears, and inside references to the fact that Chow Yun-fat has gained weight since the first installment. The film's climactic poker game is a tense confrontation, but it is broken by two sidekicks' silly asides about Dragon Ball comics and AIDS. Similarly, Yuen Kwei's *Fero* is a serious gangster melodrama, but when the protagonist starts to spin lies about his pals, the film veers into anachronistic absurdities (such as making a 1930s triad leader into a pop star, complete with 1990s light show). Perhaps even stranger is *The Untold Story* (1992), which alternates the restaurant's cruel murder spree with brazen gag scenes featuring the beautiful women in the chief investigator's life.

And endings? Episodic construction makes resolutions harder to predict than in most Hollywood films. Helen So, a U.S. importer of Hong Kong movies, has put her finger on it. "Anything goes in Hong Kong cinema. In American movies, the hero never dies. They never kill the child. Most Americans like a happy ending. In Hong Kong films you never know quite how the ending is going to be. It's very unpredictable, which makes it fun."¹¹ In many kung-fu films, such as *The Killer Wears White* (1980) and *The Bare-Footed Kid* (1993), the hero dies while eliminating the villain. The original version of *Righting Wrongs* (1986) includes a scene of a henchman blowing up children, and at the end both protagonists die. No one is killed in the comedy *The Eighth Happiness* (1988), but after a happy ending in which every man gets the woman of his dreams, an epilogue shows the most hapless man losing his. Such surprises could be read as realism, or as simply a narrative artifice that elicits a broader range of emotions than American cinema has usually allowed.

The last example reminds us that like other popular cinemas Hong Kong has recourse to the double ending, which though defying plausibility allows a popular film to evoke a wide bandwidth of emotions. *Always on My Mind* (1993) centers on a harried TV newsmen stricken with cancer. The film milks a long farewell scene and then indulges in a lachrymose montage to the title song. Suddenly, a final scene shows him recovered and living happily with his family. *The Iceman Cometh* (1989) goes even further. At the climax of this time-travel fantasy, the ancient swordsman (Yuen Biao) leaves the streetwalker (Maggie Cheung) to return to the Ming dynasty. But then an epilogue shows her having given up prostitution and working in a snack shop. With even less motivation than the second ending of *An Autumn's Tale*, a shy young student passes her: it is her warrior, apparently reincarnated, and the film ends as she seizes him in delight.

The double ending can work in reverse, promising an affirmative ending before going downbeat, as in the boxing drama *Somebody Up There Likes Me* (1996). By winning the climactic bout, the hero redeems himself in the eyes of his parents and is assured of his girlfriend's love. He immediately dies from the injuries of years of street fighting. The viewer can feel that he is vindicated and yet cheated of full happiness.

The films with epilogues are the exceptions. Many 1970s kung-fu dramas ended on an abrupt freeze-frame at the close of the final combat, leaving other plot elements dangling. One premise of reel-by-reel construction was that the finale should leave the viewer with a vivid impression, and perhaps the midnight screenings made filmmakers unwilling to tack on epilogues, when impatient spectators would begin chatting and heading for the exits. With the sudden freeze-frame, filmmakers could hold the viewer to the very last moment. Shu Kei suggests that filmmakers "were influenced by the freeze-frame at the end of *Burch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969). In any event, the last shot of *Fist of Fury* (Fig. 7D.3) proved so dramatic that the halted final image became a firm local convention.

During the 1980s, Gordon Chan recalls, screenwriters debated how to add epilogues conveying a thematic point. [The epilogue that Chan shot for *Fight Back to School*, 1991, was cut.]¹² When epilogues were used, they tended to provide a final plot twist, as in *The Iceman Cometh*, *Always on My Mind*, and *An Autumn's Tale*, rather than the brief celebration of the plot's achieved stable state we typically find in Hollywood. ("Think of the epilogue of *Alien* [1979], when Ripley slips gravely back into her sleep capsule as the pod floats off into space.") The endings of Tsui Hark's *Shanghai Blues* (1984) and Woo's *The Killer* (1989) carefully avoided abruptness by dwelling on characters' reactions to the final turn of events. By the 1990s filmmakers were creating unhurried final moments, as in *Pong Sai-yuk* (1993), *In the Heat of Summer* (1994), *The Big Buller* (1996), and *Task Force* (1997).¹³

Even a plot built out of discrete episodes can gain coherence by mobilizing two universal storytelling strategies: parallel situations and motive associations. Neither is specific to episodic plotting, of course, but they stand out when a film lacks mechanisms of sustained cause and effect, and they can unify episodic action in surprisingly rich ways.

Parallels can govern entire plotlines, as in the double or triple courtships that wind through romantic comedies like *The Eighth Happiness* (1988) and *Boys are Easy* (1993). In *All's Well Ends Well* (1992), three love affairs alternate in importance before all get resolved at the in-laws' eightieth birthday party. *The Banquet* (1991) oscillates between two rival property developers, each with an assistant and a romantic partner, hatching schemes to swindle a mogul who wants to rebuild Kuwait after the Gulf War. Parallels can have a more folkloric quality too, as in *The Dead and the*

Deadly, which works variations on dead husbands returning to chastise randy widows.

Kung-fu films like *King Boxer* (1972) often play off parallels between competing schools, with the good son and his benevolent *sifu* set off against the heartless killer and his even more wicked master. In *police's* the parallels between cop and crook constitute a genre convention, running from Fritz Lang's *M* (1931) through Clint Eastwood's *Tightrope* (1984) to *Gun Men* and Michael Mann's *Heat* (1995). John Woo's heroic triad sagas, obsessed with doubling their protagonists, underscore parallels by emphatic visual devices. Parallel characters or lines of action are time-honored ways to fill out any plot, and they can make loosely connected episodes seem rigorously related.

Parallel elements are often signaled by recurring motifs—lines of dialogue, lighting, costume, props, setting, bits of gesture, snatches of music, anything that can be highlighted and then repeated. Some motifs recur through all of popular cinema, such as the photo of the beloved that can be gazed at in moments of reverie or torn up in anger. Some are folkloric, such as the genie who grants three wishes (*Whatever you Want*, 1994), or the symmetrical wounding that one finds throughout Hong Kong action cinema. After the hero of *Casino Raiders* (1989) is hurt in his left hand, he demands that the villain bet his right arm and leg, while the villain counterbets on the heroine's right hand.

Sometimes the motifs are simple, localized, and strongly signaled. In *Moment of Romance* (1990), a feather-stuffed Macao pillow starts as a young man's gift to his girlfriend, when she fights off her parents at the by-drofil station, she flails them with the pillow, which bursts open. The title of *Summer Snow* (1995) marks the central motif. At first the summer snow is the flutter of blossoms when the heroine leaves the clinic with her Alzheimer's-addled father-in-law. At the end, the two of them on the roof face the future reconciled, as pigeon feathers flutter down. Or the motif may be more oblique. In *Somebody Up There Likes Me*, the prizefighter and the woman meet when she brings water bottles to ringside for his opponent. Later, after he accidentally kills her brother in a bout, she bashes him with a water bottle. In *God of Gamblers* (1989), the wounded Ko Chun has a bandage wrapped around his head, with a single spot of blood in the center (Fig. 7.2). It resembles a *hachimaki* sweatband with the rising sun in the center, recalling that he has agreed to represent the Japanese in a gambling contest. Such visual motifs remind us how strongly popular cinema is weighted toward purely pictorial expression.

Music too gains a great deal of power through motivic organization. Since the 1980s, chiefly under the influence of New Wave directors, composers began to write through-composed film scores. The arrival of the synthesizer allowed them to turn out lots of music fast and cheaply, and so the sheer amount of music swelled. Only about five minutes of *The East Is*



7.2 *God of Gamblers*: Ko Chun's bandage.

Red (1993) are without musical accompaniment, no more than a minute goes unscored.

Ingenuous directors began using music to pull story episodes together. The opening credits of Tsui Hark's *Peking Opera Blues* (1986) tell us that the music will be important: a painted-face actor rolls his eyes on the beat, and the title's three characters, *dao ma dan* ("Sword and Steed Woman"), flash onto the screen as they are belted out by the offscreen female singer. This pulse-pounding song immediately promises rapid action, an effect enhanced by Tsui's cutting the credits shots to match the musical phrases. Apart from generic accompaniment for suspense and chases, specific musical motifs play off the film's drama. The main theme, a wistful and languid melody, is first associated with the general's daughter, Cao Yun, but it quickly expands to denote the group of young people she befriends. Eventually the motif will serve as an all-purpose love theme, paralleling her affection for her brutish father with the attractions among her friends that never quite blossom into romances. By the end the theme has come to evoke Beijing itself, first when a whiff of the tune is heard as the three women study a globe, and later when the film bids farewell to the opera house.

Intwoven with this languid motif are two others. A jilting song ("Snowflakes Are Dancing") is first heard when the three heroines are cast out into the wintry night, later it underscores their subterfuges. The rousing title theme reappears quietly when the three women take refuge in the theater, then bursts out exuberantly in the epilogue as the five friends ride off in different directions. All three main motifs are also treated to different tempos and orchestrations. Perhaps most subtly, the languid theme is introduced in teasing bits, each occurrence adding a bar or two before it blossoms in its full form when Cao Yun becomes anguished at her betrayal of her father's trust. *Peking Opera Blues'* score helps bind together a fairly episodic intrigue.

This example also shows how any motif, auditory or pictorial, can heighten emotion. It can be invested with feelings on its first appearance,

and when it returns those feelings can be enriched, qualified, or undercut. In *He Ain't Heavy, He's My Father* the son has a locket given to him by his elderly parents, a token of sacrifices of which he is largely unaware. After he is mysteriously flung back to the past, he meets his parents in their youth. He comes to respect his father as a leader of their tenement neighborhood and his mother as a woman who has left her wealthy family for love. He gives the locket to them as a token of his more mature appreciation of their struggles. What pleases us is not only the young couple's naive puzzlement at his gesture but our knowledge that at some point later in their lives they will spontaneously give the locket (back) to him, and he will now treasure it.

Or take the rather different emotional circuit hooked up in *God of Gamblers*. The master gambler Ko Chun is introduced through two motifs, his jade ring and his love of gold-wrapped slices of chocolate. The motifs suggest his upscale tastes and his adherence to Chinese tradition (jade and gold connote royalty), and they balance his maturity (the ring) against an incipient childishness (a passion for chocolate). The film goes on to expand each motif into a large-scale plot phase. The childish side of Ko Chun emerges in extreme form when a blow on the head gives him amnesia. He reverts to an infantile dependence on those around him, and his panic attacks can be calmed only by chocolate. The jade-ring motif gets developed in a more roundabout way. We know that Ko Chun has a habit of touching the ring when he is anxious about the cards he holds, and his opponents, having studied videotapes of his games, notice it too. But after the climactic game it is revealed that he knew they knew, and he deliberately stroked the ring to make them bet in error. The audience enjoys seeing a familiar element given a new significance: the grown man's idiosyncratic taste becomes a boy's demand for chocolate; the tic we have noticed is noticed by Ko-chun's adversaries too, but he proves to have been one jump ahead of them, and us.

This interplay of motif, implication, and emotion can extend beyond the single film, thanks to sequels. Critics normally deplore follow-ups as crass efforts to cash in on hits, but sequels and prequels can rework motifs we know, enriching them through new associations. *God of Gamblers 3: The Early Stage* (1997) reveals the origins of Ko-chun's slicked-down hair (Alain Delon) and jade ring (a woman he loved in his youth). More ambiguously, Tsui Hark's *A Better Tomorrow III* (1989) inverts the macho ethic of Woo's first two films, showing Mark's trademarks—flapping duster, smoky glasses, two-fisted shagging—to be derived from a woman who trained him in combat. It is not so much that such prequels, understood as prologues, make us rethink previous installments. Rather, we bring knowledge of the first entries to the prequel and watch how that knowledge is stretched or qualified by a new context. We know that Ko Chun will touch his ring, but in the prequel the gesture is more than a tic or stratagem, becoming a reminder of the dead woman he loved. We know that Mark is a

resourceful warrior, but in the prequel a new range of feeling is invoked when his style is traced to a strong, clever woman. Since audiences are unwilling to give up characters they love, making a good sequel involves coaxing new shades of feeling out of the emotions already invested in familiar iconography.

The emotional resonance of motifs becomes particularly noticeable in two unusual strategies of Hong Kong storytelling. The momentary flashback not only reminds us of earlier scenes but also intensifies the emotion. The device goes back to the silent era and was gradually pruned out of Western cinema, but it is alive and well in Hong Kong. At the climax of *Peel 100%* (1996), Cherrie strums an old song on the guitar, and while she sings we see dissolving views of earlier scenes with Jerry, the young man she's not sure she loves. John Woo's *The Killer* (1989) likewise makes lyrical use of the fragmentary flashback. A second strategy is also anachronistic by Western standards. Many Hong Kong films reprise shots from the film while the final credits roll. These images replay enjoyable moments and may also recapitulate motifs that have bound the film together. At the limit, the credit sequence can provide a "rereading" of the film's action. The reprise in *She Shoots Straight* gathers scenes emphasizing male foolishness and female bonding, stressing the traumatic moment of loss, the death of the son/husband/brother. The end of *Shanghai Blues* (1984) cites an earlier scene, and the credits montage then replays that scene, as if the film were caught in an endless loop.

One artistic strength of Hong Kong cinema, then, is its use of parallels and motifs—musical, visual, or verbal—to bind together episodically plotted films. Zhang Che, King Hu, John Woo, Tsui Hark, Patrick Leung, and other outstanding filmmakers have understood how these craft traditions can also enhance a movie's emotional dimensions. The devices can be just as useful when the action is more tightly constructed. Thanks largely to the early 1990s generation, a finer-grained plotting is emerging in Hong Kong cinema.

Take again the hoary device of the flashback, but not the brief one showing a character overcome by a traumatic memory or a kung-fu hero suddenly recalling a technique that will defeat his opponent. Instead, some recent movies build their plots around extensive flashbacks, some of which take surprising turns. Jeff Lau's *Days of Tomorrow* (1993) centers on a film company seeking to remake an old movie. A young woman working on the set meets people who tell her about her mysterious father, the star Shing, and the brief flashbacks are mixed with her voice-over monologue. So far, so ordinary. Gradually the frame story is forgotten as the plot unwinds a long flashback that culminates in Shing's suicide attempt. At this point we get, for the first time in the film, his inner monologue; the shift in point of view occurs when the daughter understands the reasons for her father's suicide.

More viscerally, the key flashback in Herman Yau and Danny Lee's *The*

Unfold Story (1993) catches the viewer between sympathy and loathing. The film intercuts the exploits of the cannibalistic killer with the police squad's casual investigation. It is hard to attach feelings to anyone in this carnival of sadism and petty ineptitude. But when the killer is captured and the police extract a confession under torture, we can hardly withhold some sympathy from a demented man who is suffering so much. Then comes the flashback to the crime we have not seen—the killer's relentless butchering of a family. We are left with no one to feel for, the killer commits suicide, his crimes disturbingly unexplained and unexcused.

Other recent films shrewdly refine parallels and motifs. One of the best examples is *He's a Woman, She's a Man* (1994). Wing worships her singing idol, Rose, and idealizes Rose's long-running affair with her composer and record producer, Sam Koo. To get closer to Rose and Sam, Wing disguises herself as a boy and answers an audition for aspiring singers. She is utterly untalented, but to show that he can make a star out of anybody, Sam picks Wing. Thanks to careful packaging, she (as a he) becomes a teen idol. All of Sam's team assumes that the androgynous Wing is gay. When Wing moves in with the energetically heterosexual Sam, Sam finds himself disturbingly attracted to his protégé. Sam is worried that he is becoming gay and so breaks off with Rose and flees from Wing. Having destroyed the love between her two idols, Wing returns crushed to her platonic roommate, Yu Lo. He convinces her to return to Sam, revealing herself as a woman. When Sam sees her all he can say is: "I don't care if you're a woman or a man, I love you."

Although director Peter Chan and screenwriter James Yuen were rewriting the script throughout shooting, the plot is satisfyingly trim.¹⁴ The film begins with Rose winning the televised Music Awards, and she uses the occasion to thank Sam. The film ends a year later, with the next awards broadcast, in which the winning Rose announces that she and Sam are finished. Two celebratory parties, one after each award ceremony, measure the distance the story travels: the first party hints at Sam's dissatisfaction with Rose, while the second shows him pining for the lost Wing. Yu Lo teaches Wing to walk like a man; at the climax he shows her how to run like a woman (Figs. 7.3, 7.4). There is also a strong character arc, with Sam moving from annoyance at Wing's naïveté to friendly interest and then to anguished desire. At the same time, Wing gradually sheds her fangirl illusions and ungainly androgyny, becoming in the final scene a young woman. Even Rose, who could have been a comic haridan, is given a mature dignity in accepting her loss. During the first party Rose gives Sam a comically sexy T-shirt, but in the final one she gives him a plane ticket to Africa—where he had always wanted to go for inspiration ("like Paul Simon," as the script caustically has him say).

Objects are marked for plot functions: Rose's roses, to which Sam is growing allergic; Wing's Sesame Street puppets, with which she carries on imaginary dialogues; the piano at which Sam composes Wing's song, "My



7.3 *He's a Woman, She's a Man*: Wing learns to walk like a man . . .



7.4 . . . and run like a woman.

Life's Search", and above all the green-glowing wands that fans wave during concerts. Wing naturally has plenty, and in her disguise she straps a bundle together to give her trousers a plausible bulge. When she and Sam get trapped in his jammed lift, she whips out one to calm his claustrophobia. At the end, Wing and Sam embrace in the lift, and in good Hollywood tradition it jams again, but now his voice comes out of the darkness: "Who cares?"

As an upscale, self-consciously sophisticated UFO production, *He's a Woman* locates its charms firmly in plot geometry. Chan and his collaborators understand that the rhymes and echoes, the foreshadowings and twists, the interanimating parallels can all serve emotion. Audiences laugh delightedly when Wing brings out her glowing wands to brighten Sam's elevator. Your skin prickles when, as Wing runs through the streets to find Sam, up surges the music of his song to her: "Search for all the moments in life." At the party, Sam dejectedly watches Rose working the room; cut to Wing running through the streets to find him (Figs. 7.5–7.7). The three shots draw a contrast (worldly Rose, simple Wing), arouse hope of a last-minute meeting (the crosscutting convention), and suggest Sam's wish that Rose be replaced by Wing. A dynamically shaped plot can map out emotional buildup and intense release, while sailing in surprises that retrospectively feel inevitable. This design provides a different sort of pleasure from the abrupt oscillations and sharp contrasts of episodic storytelling. Critics whose tastes run to postmodern fragmentation often ignore tight plotting, but even in a tradition favoring slackness it can be a powerful part of the art of entertainment.

Martial-arts films display many of Hong Kong's storytelling principles with particular vividness. These unpretentious movies illustrate how a popular cinema can draw on indigenous subject matter to create distinctive, strongly profiled plots.

The history and legends surrounding China's martial arts provide a trea-



7.5 Sam looks ...



7.6 ... and sees Rose.



7.7 Cut to Wing, also in white, running to Sam.

sure house of stories, akin to Arthurian romance or tales of the U.S. frontier. Warlords promoted combat techniques well before 300 B.C., but the most important development occurred when the Bodhidharma carried martial arts to China along with Chan Buddhism (known in Japanese as Zen). Around 500 A.D., tradition has it, the Bodhidharma installed himself at the Shaolin Temple at the foot of the Songshan Mountains and taught monks meditation, breathing exercises, and fighting skills.

The Shaolin Temple is the emblem of Chinese martial arts, and its legends have been recycled in film after film. The temple is said to have housed about 1,500 monks, 500 of them trained fighters. Over the centuries the martial monks were occasionally called to help emperors with military campaigns, and Shaolin fighting techniques spread throughout East Asia. In 1674 the Qing ruler razed the temple. According to legend, the five monks who survived became the "Five Ancestors" who founded the secret societies known generically as triads. In fact many monks survived the fire and became street performers and Peking Opera actors. Later the Shaolin Temple was rebuilt, but in 1928 it was burned again in a battle among local warlords.¹⁵

Whereas martial arts were quickly integrated into Japan's warrior society, in China they survived in the shadows. The Qing dynasty (1644-1911) outlawed them as a threat to security. Some martial artists became entertainers, putting on harmless public demonstrations, lion dances, and

Peking Opera plays. The more devoted students of fighting went underground, developing batteries of secret techniques. Kung-fu plots often draw upon this tradition: the rivalry between schools, the duty to avenge a master or punish a disciple who has misused the master's teaching, and the pupil's need to learn a devastating style.

Popular literature drew extensively on martial-arts lore. Chivalric tales had circulated for centuries before coalescing in folk epics like *The Water Margin* (1644), which in turn became the basis of a flourishing family of genres during the Qing dynasty. There were tales of martial exploits, love stories with a chivalric element, and fantasies of supernatural swordsmen. These formed a central part of China's pulp fiction during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The 1920s saw a boom in Shanghai *wuxia* (heroic chivalry) novels. Some of these were highly nationalistic tales about Chinese striking back at Western imperialists. Others featured warriors with the power to fling swords great distances, emit death rays, ride on giant birds, and slay monsters. In one novel a giant serpent confronts the hero. He turns his sword into a ray of light and rides it up to a cliff edge, where he joins the heroine Ling-yun. The serpent spews a ball of fire at the humans, but Ling-yun flings her secret weapon, Heavenly Yellow Pearl, into the fireball, blowing up the serpent.¹⁶ Admittedly, this sounds like a Tsui Hark scene, but even less fantastic tales present heroes vaulting great distances and developing ironlike palms, feats that some martial-arts schools claim are attainable through arduous training.¹⁷ (The Boxers, who imagined themselves invulnerable to Westerners' bullets, were in the grip of such beliefs.) In any martial-arts film, there will be a thin line between what might be barely possible physically and what seems to outsiders pure fancy.

Martial-arts fiction continued to flourish after World War II in Hong Kong and Taiwan. There emerged a new-style *wuxia* novel centering on independent heroes who gradually matured, both as fighters and as men. The tone was somewhat antiheroic, displaying suspicion of authority and criticizing the hero's egotism and greed. The Taiwanese writer Gu Long published a series celebrating aggressive, ascetic heroes, and these spawned many films, such as Chor Yuen's *Killer Clans* (1976) and *Magic Blade* (1976).¹⁸ The most famous exponent of the new *wuxia* novel was the Hong Kong writer Jin Yong, also known as Louis Cha. Jin developed the idea of a disabled hero, prototypically the one-armed swordsman. Many 1970s films were based on episodes in Jin's stupendously popular works, and more recently Wong Kar-wai's somber *Asbes of Time* (1994) and Jeff Lau's spoof *The Eagle-Shooting Heroes* (1993) derive from Jin tales.¹⁹

The *wuxia* novels and films created a heroic, mythicized past that was also on display in another story form. Early in the nineteenth century the Peking Opera emerged as a distinct entertainment. It seized audiences through vigorous music, gorgeous costumes and makeup, and above all the

virtuosity of the actor, who was obliged to sing, dance, mime, perform acrobatics, and recite dialogue. Peking Opera created a set of stock types to be recycled in play after play. The actor's skill lay in the flawless execution of set-pieces and in subtle changes in formulas. Like filmmakers later, the troupe worked without a script, strung together routines to suit new plots and devising fresh lyrics for traditional melodies. Cantonese Opera, the sweeter and less refined variant of Peking Opera that settled into Hong Kong, adapted the same premises.

In fiction, onstage, and in movies, martial arts came to saturate Hong Kong's popular culture. Legendary swordsmen and kung-fu masters are recycled through television series, and flying heroes fill comic books. One can't accuse it all of being boys' schoolyard games either, if only because women play a heroic role in these sagas to an extent without parallel in European or Anglo-American adventure yarns. From the swordswomen of silent Shanghai films through Xu Feng of the King Hu films and Angela Mao to Michele Yeoh in *Yes, Madam!* (1985) and Anita Mui in *Saviour of the Soul* (1991), Hong Kong action cinema has celebrated women warriors.

What brings audiences back to these tales? To some extent, they represent a China made for exiles. Roger Garcia has called martial-arts films a form of "mythic remembrance" for the diaspora, a legitimating fantasy.²⁰ However unhappy Chinese history has really been, one can imagine belonging to a country of stable traditions—not of law or government, but of honorable personal conduct. The *wuxia* tales make honor a matter of family, school, and ultimately the individual.

As each generation reworks these myths, Hong Kong critics often note, there emerges a recurring heroic plot. The *wuxia* hero is a gifted exponent of the fighting arts, and however bloody his or her deeds, the hero possesses righteousness (*yi*). The hero's loyalty is to kin, friend, or teacher, all of whom must be defended against socially sanctioned violence. In the American western, the hero may bring civilized justice or right the wrongs that have evaded authority. But China has no strong traditions of impersonal, objective law. "The most striking characteristic in our political life as a nation," wrote Lin Yu-tang, "is the absence of a constitution and of the idea of civil rights."²¹ The hero must exercise *yi* because the larger community offers no legal recourse; indeed, often the villains rule. Violence becomes the only solution.²² The tradition continues in Hong Kong *policier*s, where the rogue cop, male or female, pursues illegal investigation, intimidation, torture, and vendetta punishment.²³

By duty the hero is pledged to avenge any harm done family, friend, or teacher. The basic motive, in most martial-arts and gunplay films, is revenge. Often there is little psychological backstory about why the villain is cruel or how the hero came to possess *yi*. There is seldom any scruple about the morality of taking revenge, any sense that it taints the avenger. It is a rare film, such as Lau Kar-leung's *Eight-Diamond Pole Fighter* (1984),

that shows revenge leading to obsessiveness, madness, and the slaughter of innocents. Usually the only price of revenge is that you may be obliged to kill a treacherous friend or relative. In Woo's *The Killer* (1989), John's drama revolves around the replacement of a betraying friend (Sidney the go-between) by an admiring adversary (detective Li). John's suffering springs partly from his wounding of an innocent woman, partly from his reluctance to punish Sidney for disloyalty.

Revenge can govern the whole action. As in Jacobean tragedy, the villain's initial act of aggression or betrayal may force the hero to spend the entire plot getting payback. Alternatively, things may be set in motion by competition in a tournament, or business rivalry among gangs, or (less often) competition for a woman. Typically someone dear to the hero will be hurt, or the hero will lose face through public humiliation. Thereafter action is fueled by vengeance. This can yield an escalating rhythm, since truly satisfying retaliation must raise the stakes. And whereas American films tend to let the vengeful hero off the hook at the end, allowing destiny to do the dirty work, Hong Kong heroes tend to be pitiless. Near the climax of *Lethal Weapon* (1987), Danny Glover allows the accidentally trapped villain to blow up. But at the start of *Righting Wrongs* (1986), Yuen Biao punishes the trapped assassins by firing the shot that sends their car into flames.

Granted, this conception of masculine honor is playground morality. Yet it is powerful for this very reason. If one had to pick dramatic motivations that would be understood around the world, regardless of the civil society in which one lived, revenge would be high on the list. One cross-cultural appeal of Hong Kong storytelling, particularly for male audiences, is clearly the central role it assigns to vengeance. The films' power is probably intensified for viewers who live in cultures in which civil justice is as untrustworthy as in classic Chinese society.

Vengeance as a driving force can yield intricate plots, as in Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*, but in Hong Kong movies it usually serves to enhance episodic tendencies. A film's *raison d'être* is the action, laid out in semi-detachable set-pieces. The stretches between the fights are filled out with delaying devices—episodes of scheming between rival schools or gangs, displays of combat techniques, the sufferings of the hero's sidekick, the arrival of secondary villains (each of whom must be dealt with in a separate fight). Regardless of the genre, the delaying devices—a series of torments or slayings—may serve to make the villains ever more worthy of punishment. The tone need not be consistent. Kung-fu films have a weakness for low-comedy digressions, a feature that carries over into cop-and-gangster films of the 1980s.

Whereas the 1960s swordplay films often developed some complexity of intrigue, the 1970s kung-fu films stripped the plot down to its essentials: a string of fights. Either the hero works his way through a host of enemies

(the Bruce Lee variant), or the hero undergoes training, then works his way through a host of enemies (the Wang Yu/Jackie Chan variant). In any case the climax is a lengthy duel between the hero and the principal villain. Often the hero is put at a momentary disadvantage before he wins by superior skill or a secret tactic, or with the help of allies.²⁴ (Ganging up on a powerful antagonist is perfectly acceptable.) The modern *policier*s are not so different, with plot modules devoted to the discovery of traitors, the death of innocent witnesses, and the hero's public disgrace, wrapping things up in a culminating fight that can last as long as two reels.

Screenwriters of the 1960s may not have realized that by highlighting impressive fights they weakened plot structure. One recalls: "We wanted to emulate what Kurosawa had achieved. For instance, when we saw the ending of *Sanjuro* and *Yojimbo*, we'd say, 'That's the effect we want!' I think we were preoccupied with dramatic effects, and didn't think enough about the narrative as a whole, character development and relationships."²⁵ The same holds true for most Hong Kong action films today. Yet the very simplicity of the plotlines has helped the films travel well, and sometimes intriguing variations emerge. You can have several heroes, even five as in *Shaolin Avengers* (1976). You can proceed by a sort of "numerical exhaustion" principle. *Invincible Armour* (1977) centers on a villain whose body seems impregnable, so the hero must discover that this "armor" actually has five weak points, each of which he tries to penetrate in turn (and each of which is signaled by a flashing red dot). You can also multiply revenge plots. As we've already seen, one virtue of episodic plotting is the possibility of developing vivid contrasts of tone among parallel lines of action. In *Ninja in the Dragon's Den* (1982) a ninja comes to China bent on avenging the death of his father, and his target is Li, an old master who was once a member of a ninja society. This is a serious revenge plot. Running alongside it is another one involving a young martial artist who, when Li is killed by the avenging ninja, sets out to avenge his death. Eventually, in a comic version of the father-son motif, the youngster and the ninja join forces to defeat a magician who pursues them because they humiliated his son. Like many popular traditions, martial-arts plots often reveal a surprising formal ingenuity.

Modern urban action pictures have found another way to knit episodes together—by taking the spotlight off a single protagonist and interweaving various characters' stories. This can suggest a measure of realism, and it encourages the filmmaker to develop parallels and recurring motifs. *The Log* (1996), a police procedural directed by Derek Chau Sing-kai, presents a cross-section of cops' personal problems—the overzealousness of a tough inspector, the sick fear felt by a rookie who accidentally shoots a thug, and the inarticulate pain of a dogged veteran who discovers that his wife is having an affair with his superior. The Chinese title, which translates as *Three Injured Policemen*, underscores the parallels. Although energetic action

scenes trigger each man's crisis, there are moments of reflection and irony, as when the inspector is put in a cell with the suspect he has beaten and is abashed when the suspect forgives him "because I have accepted Jesus." Like other police procedurals, *The Log* pressurizes its action by setting all three plotlines within a brief span—ominously, the New Year's Eve that brings in 1997. The three working stiffs, all of whom plan to stay in Hong Kong after the handover to China, are counterposed to the colonialist top brass, who have comfortable bolt-holes abroad.

The same sort of compressed time scheme accentuates ironic parallels in another triple-strand crime plot, that of Cha Chuen-yeet's *Once upon a Time in Triad Society 2* (1996). Dagger is a nervous pimp who would rather play mahjong than cut up tough. Dinosaur is a triad rascal who idolizes his mentor, an invincible fighter known as the God of the Sword. Dummy is a young, subdued plainclothes cop who wants to do his job without fuss. Through alternating editing, the film's first third contrasts Dagger's cowardice, Dinosaur's exhilaration in inflated heroics, and Dummy's dutiful, somewhat dull prudence. Each young man has a woman: Dagger's impudent whore, JJ; Dinosaur's teenybopper girlfriend, Deda; and Dummy's pregnant wife, Crystal. The couples' lives intersect when rival triad chiefs call for a confrontation in Mongkok. Dagger and Dinosaur, who are friends, face each other on opposite sides of a crowd's shouting match, while Dummy and other cops race through the streets to prevent a gang riot.

Inadvertently, Dagger and Dinosaur trigger the fight, and the central stretch of the film shows, in an utterly unromanticized way, the gangs laying waste to the neighborhood. Dagger tries his best to hide but has to come out to protect JJ. After hacking up attackers on all sides, Dinosaur finds his gang wiped out. He is gushing blood. At the same time Dummy, who thinks his wife has been wounded, hunts for her. Each plotline is resolved in a vivid climax. Dummy finds his wife unharmed, Dinosaur dies listening to a romantic ballad on Deda's Walkman, and in a sequence of grotesque comedy Dagger is sent out to assassinate his boss's rival. The film concludes with a trick ending and a grimly comic wrapup.

Once upon a Time in Triad Society 2 blends genre-based suspense and fights with a carefully measured range of tone. Here Hong Kong's inclination toward episodic narrative creates a tissue of parallel scenes, and the tendency to mingle physical agony, sadness, and humor is controlled by confining each emotional register to a distinct line of action. Hong Kong critics saw Cha's film as debunking the hip glorification of twenty-something triads. Through its contrasting plotlines the film dismantles the conventions of loyalty and chivalry that defined the "heroes" movies and the *Young and Dangerous* cycle.

Intervened plotting permits a nice balance between severity and slackness. In Patrick Leung's *Task Force* (1997), each detective-centered plotline has its share of pathos and humor, incidents accrue in a somewhat open-

ended way, and the film teases us with romantic rivalries that never quite crystallize. Fruit Chan's *Made in Hong Kong* (1997) presents two main sets of characters: the young debt collector Chung Chiu along with his parents and friends, and the young girl Susan Hui, with her family and friends. The plot centers on Chung's efforts to make peace with his mother, protect his retarded friend, Sylvester, carry on a romance with his girlfriend, and avoid becoming too deeply involved with the triads. Sylvester witnesses Susan Hui's suicidal jump from a building, and he brings Chung two bloodsoaked letters. Chung's efforts to deliver them lead him to explore Susan's reasons for killing herself. After Sylvester and Chung's girlfriend, Wing, also die needlessly, Chung faces the same despair Susan had felt. Adding his own codicil to her note and delivering it to her parents, Chung kills himself. *Made in Hong Kong's* adolescent anguish is sharpened by its hero's gradual discovery that a stranger shares his disillusionment with the adult world.

Slack or tightly woven, Hong Kong films reveal principles of popular plotting as if under an X ray. These principles may seem simple, but the tempo of production forces filmmakers to deploy them in novel ways. And sometimes the sheer familiarity of a device can arouse the thrill of circumstances clicking neatly into place. In *Casino Raiders* (1989) Sam (Andy Lau), who has failed his wife and friend, must redeem himself in a crucial card game. He takes off his wedding ring to be able to play more nimbly. Cut to a close-up of him slipping the ring off in the foreground, with his wife looking on apprehensively behind him. A straightforward scene like this provides an occasion for the audience to recall earlier events, to speculate on the characters' emotional states, to dwell on the loss, risk, and hope that the moment bears. In order to save his marriage Sam must take off his ring, he becomes worthy of winning only by momentarily relinquishing his pledge of commitment. Thanks to norms of storytelling and performance, style and genre, the moment takes on a vivid coloring, becoming at once fresh and deeply traditional. The forms and formulas of popular entertainment need not be subverted in order to command our interest. They have proved themselves over time and cam, often with very little revamping, authentically engage an audience's eyes and ears and feelings.

WHATEVER YOU WANT

1. Interview with Wong Jing, 22 November 1996.

7 PLOTS, SLACK AND STRETCHED

1. Geoffrey O'Brien, "Blazing Passions," *New York Review of Books*, 24 September 1992, p. 41.
2. Li Chenk-to in roundtable discussion, "A Review of the 1987 Hong Kong Cinema," in *New Hong Kong Films 87/88* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1988), p. 7.
3. See Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde," in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (London: British Film Institute, 1990), pp. 56-60.
4. Viktor Shklovsky, "The Relationship between Devices of Plot Construction and General Devices of Style" [1919], in *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Elinwood Park, Ill.: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990), pp. 28-34.
5. For a discussion of this position, see Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Analyzing Classical Narrative Structure* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 344-352.
6. Gordon Chan interview, 23 November 1996; Clifton Ko, remarks in panel, "The Operations of the Hong Kong Film Industry: From 1984 to 1989," in *Fifty Years of Electric Shadows: Report of Conference on Hong Kong Cinema 10-12 April 1997*, ed. Law Kar (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1997), pp. 16-17.
7. Interview with Abe Kwong, 22 November 1996; interview with Peter Tsi, 21 March 1997.
8. Clifton Ko, remark in panel discussion at the conference "Fifty Years of Electric Shadows," sponsored by the HKIFF, 10 April 1997.
9. Li Chenk-to, "Thoughts on the Films of Qiu Jian and Zhu Shilin," in *A Comparative Study of Post-War Mandarin and Cantonese Cinema: The Films of Zhu Shilin, Qiu Jian, and Other Directors*, ed. Shu Kei (Hong Kong: HKIFF/Urban Council, 1983), pp. 113-114.
10. Madeleine Doran, *Endeavors of Art: A Study of Form in Elizabethan Drama* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1954), p. 298.
11. Quoted in David Armstrong, "Video Village: South San Francisco Company Dominates Asian Film Distribution Market," *San Francisco Examiner*, 11 May 1998, p. B1.
12. Interview with Shu Kei, 20 November 1996; interview with Gordon Chan, 23 November 1996.
13. Thanks to Athena Tsui and Thomas Shin for suggestions on these points.
14. Interview with Peter Chan, 28 November 1996.
15. Howard Reid and Michael Croucher, *The Way of the Warrior: The Paradox of the Martial Arts* (London: Century, 1983), pp. 22-62.
16. James J. Y. Liu, *The Chinese Knight-Errot* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), pp. 131-133.
17. Instructions can be found in David Chow and Richard Spengler, *Kung Fu: History, Philosophy, and Technique* (Barbank: Unique, 1982), pp. 145-154.
18. Liu Danna, "From Chivalric Fiction to Martial Arts Film," in *A Study of the*

Hong Kong Swordplay Film (1945-1980), ed. Lau Shing-hon (Hong Kong: HKIFF/Urban Council, 1996), pp. 57-59.

19. For a detailed study of the connections between *Ashes of Time* and the novels of Jin Yong, see Juanita Huan Zhou, "Ashes of Time: The Tragedy and Salvation of the Chinese Intellectuals," *Asian Cinema* 10, no. 1 (Fall 1998): 62-70.
20. Roger Garcia, "Alive and Kicking, the Kung Fu Film Is a Legend," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 20 October 1985, p. 61.
21. Quoted in Michael Harris Bond, *Beyond the Chinese Face: Insights from Psychohistory* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 58.
22. Ma Ka-fai, "Hero, Hong Kong Style: A Structural Study of Hero Films in Hong Kong" (M.A. thesis, University of Chicago, 1990), pp. 13-16.
23. I thank Peter Tsi for suggesting this idea to me.
24. For more on these schemas, see Daniel Sauvaget, "Made in Hongkong," *Image et son* no. 281 (February 1974): 53-57.
25. Quoted in Lau Shing-hon, "Qiu Ganglian," in *Lau, Hong Kong Swordplay Film (1945-1980)*, p. 209.

8 MOTION EMOTION

1. Some of the points made in this chapter are developed in slightly different directions in my essay "Aesthetics in Action: Kung Fu, Gungplay, and Cinematic Expressivity," in *Fifty Years of Electric Shadows*, ed. Law Kar (HKIFF/Urban Council, 1997), pp. 81-89.
2. Quoted in Hubert Niogret, "J'étais à Hong-Kong, je n'ai pas vu de films karaté, mais j'ai dîné avec Run Run Shaw et chanté avec lui 'Happy Birthday to Lisa Lu,'" *Positif* no. 169 (May 1975): 39.
3. David Chow and Richard Spangler, *Kung Fu: History, Philosophy, and Technique* (Barbank: Unique, 1982), pp. 39-42; Howard Reid and Michael Croucher, *The Way of the Warrior: The Paradox of the Martial Arts* (London: Century, 1983), p. 70.
4. Mike Leader, "Yuen Wah Cometh," *Eastern Heroes* 2, no. 4 (1994): 12.
5. A. C. Scott, "The Performance of Classical Theater," in *Chinese Theater: From Its Origins to the Present Day*, ed. Colin Mackerras (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983), pp. 118-133.
6. Bey Logan, *Hong Kong Action Cinema* (London: Titan, 1995), p. 11.
7. See, for example, Law Kar's "Huang Fei-hung's Family Tree," in *Wong Fei Hung: The Invincible Master*, ed. Yu Mo-wan (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1996), unpaginated.
8. Yu Mo-wan, "Swords, Chivalry, and Palm Power: A Brief Survey of the Cantonese Martial Arts Cinema," in *A Study of the Hong Kong Swordplay Film (1945-1980)*, ed. Lau Shing-hon (Hong Kong: HKIFF/Urban Council, 1996), p. 102.
9. Lin Nien-tung, "The Martial Arts Hero," in *ibid.*, p. 13.
10. Yu Mo-wan, "Swords, Chivalry, and Palm Power," pp. 99-102.
11. See Yu Mo-wan, "The Prodigious History of Wong Fei Hong," in *A Study of the Hong Kong Martial Arts Film*, ed. Lau Shing-hon (Hong Kong: Urban Council,