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Transborder assemblages: Johnnie To's co-production action films in Mainland China

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ABSTRACT

For Hong Kong filmmakers, co-productions with mainland China are transborder assemblages characterized by increasing territorialization and coding that impart to them a palpable crisis of losing locality. However, this crisis does not necessarily mean the loss of a critical perspective. Johnnie To's three co-produced action films demonstrate his struggles to evade or even take advantage of the disadvantageous status of dislocality and work under restricted creative conditions to carve out a space for critical expressions. *Drug War* not only brings to the screen the arbitrary nature of state sovereignty by telling the story of a cross-border crime—one in which narrative doubling plays a key role—but also offers reflections on Chinese urbanization in its visual composition, which takes the style of a kind of suburban realism. *Three* and *Chasing Dream* represent To's latest efforts to develop an aesthetics of the studio defined by a tendency toward abstraction such that he uses his dislocality as a basis for a critical perspective on Hong Kong society and, especially, contemporary Chinese neoliberalism. Intertextual allusions, whether large-scale plot structures and visual styles or small-scale features of characterization and dialogue, are pervasive in To's co-productions. These allusions can and should, I argue, be drawn into the new context of To's transborder assemblages for a better understanding of his work.

KEYWORDS

Hong Kong cinema studies; co-productions; Johnnie To; transborder assemblage

Hong Kong-mainland co-productions: mainlandization or transborder assemblages?

Hong Kong-mainland co-productions have arguably been the most significant configuration of Hong Kong cinema over the past two decades, especially following the implementation of the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) in 2003. Nevertheless, for many Hong Kong scholars and critics, co-production is a problematic concept in need of interrogation. Bettinson (2020, 17–19) finds fault with what he describes as a mainlandization thesis on co-productions that dominates scholarly approaches to Hong Kong cinema in recent years that rests on four chief criticisms: China's co-production system inhibits artistic freedom; co-productions have imparted mainland aesthetics to Hong Kong films; co-productions have rendered local craft practices obsolete; and the co-production system has driven Hong Kong cinema into artistic decline. Oddly, Bettinson overlooks, or at least does not address directly, the most significant point for local critics, namely, the disappearance of local sentiments and affect in co-productions, as a result of which they tend to

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dismiss co-productions and look to the "SAR New Wave" (Szeto and Chen 2012, 122) or "an independent filmmaking culture" (Pang 2018, ix) whose cultural articulations maintain the sense of locality and Sinophone translocality. I find these arguments persuasive to a great degree, but a number of key questions remain unanswered. To begin with, it remains to be demonstrated whether co-productions have entailed the loss of locality and identity in Hong Kong cinema or it is even possible to discuss this identity. Furthermore, it is unclear whether the loss of locality necessarily means the loss of a critical perspective, or, conversely, whether the changes associated with co-production may afford Hong Kong filmmakers, at least to some extent, a starting point for developing new critical perspectives.

Other recent studies have also cast doubt on the mainlandization thesis. Sun (2018, 222), for example, analyzing the journey to mainland China of Milkyway Image, the production company of Johnnie To, argues that the cultural homogenization associated with the renationalization of Hong Kong cinema is "a process of simultaneous cooperation, negotiation and resistance" and that "the Hong Kong film industry has assumed new roles in transforming the future of the Chinese screenscape." A more common approach by scholars has been to catalog to the intertextual allusions in co-productions to the directors' previous local works. Approached this way, the choice by Hong Kong filmmakers to partner with the mainland not only resists reduction to the kind of simple *mélange* suggested by the mainlandization thesis (Chu 2015) but also marks a move into the expanded space created by the CEPA's scheme for "Hong Kong filmmakers to revive and extend signature creative strategies of Hong Kong cinema, despite censorship constraints" (Yeh and Chao 2020, 184). Bettinson (2020, 16), though, offers the most powerful rebuttal to "the myth of mainlandization" yet articulated. Responding to the four chief criticisms of co-productions that he identifies, he demonstrates the continuity of the industry in terms of both local craft practices and aesthetic options. Thus, he argues that Hong Kong filmmakers have managed to outwit China's dual-track censorship system—that is, censorship of scripts and postproduction censorship—to "preserve local work routines that date back at least to the 1970s" (20).[1] Further, at the aesthetic level, co-productions not only "sustain Hong Kong film heritage" (23), preserving basic features of Hong Kong storytelling—episodic structure, reel-by-reel plotting, tonal ruptures, motivic associations, built-in attractions, and fleeting flashbacks—but also expand its possibilities to extravagant genres such as epic, high-concept science-fiction, and fantasy-adventure films.

However, while they undeniably highlight some continuous aspects of co-productions, these arguments are vulnerable owing to their selectionism, for they overlook a rupture that is no less remarkable that is exemplified by the "local culture disconnect" of Stephen Chow's *CJ7* (Szeto and Chen 2012, 121). The strict censorship inherent in co-productions inevitably influences the way in which a project is initiated and the selection of the subject, as Bettinson acknowledges. Meanwhile, re-positioning themselves for a new market, audience, investors, and genres, it is inconceivable that Hong Kong filmmakers would keep their aesthetic forms and styles unchanged. In particular, caution is called for when considering the apparent continuity of personal authorship and aesthetics since it could turn out to be a marketing strategy that exploits audiences' nostalgia. Without such caution, the simple search for intertextual allusions only proves Bono Lee's argument that, when the local sensibility is stripped away, what is left in co-produced films is merely the "hidden currents" of earlier eras of Hong Kong cinema for the audience to trace (Yau 2015, 18).

From this perspective, co-production is closer to a complex collective activity consisting of various and even conflicting strands of rupture and continuity, assimilation, circumvention, and resistance and is not, therefore, amenable to a simple explanation. There is a particular need to avoid the essentialist trap, which discussion of the mainlandization thesis, whether in support or

opposition, easily encourages. It does not appear to be the case that a preexisting identity of Hong Kong cinema is either being swallowed by that of Chinese cinema in co-productions or revived through them. Latour's (2005, 11) reflection on traditional sociology is crucial here. The default position of traditional sociology is to define "the social" as a special domain or entity such that every activity is explicable in terms of the same social aggregates. This approach "offers convenient shorthand to designate all the ingredients already accepted in the collective realm," but, "in situations where innovations proliferate, where group boundaries are uncertain, when the range of entities to be taken into account fluctuates," one "is no longer able to trace actors' new associations." With the absence of a pre-existing state, an analyst thus should trace the very specific movement of re-association and reassembling among heterogeneous actors. In this sense, the various controversies over the co-productions indicate that the filmmakers' cross-border and heterogeneous assemblages present significant challenges to existing concepts based on pre-existing identities. From the perspective of heterogeneous assemblage, flow and movement are the norms, and stability is the exception that needs to be explained; such a perspective invites acknowledgment of the fundamental instability and contingency of both Hong Kong cinema and Chinese-language cinema more broadly in history. It is in this context that Berry (2017, 79) proposes the notion of "transborder assemblage" to "capture the geopolitical economic condition of Chinese-language cinema since its inception, caught between the transnational and indeed global span of the Chinese-speaking film market and the various national policies that regulate access to it." I draw on Berry's reasoning here to describe Hong Kong cinema because it has from the beginning been transnational in terms of market, production, technologies, and talent. For instance, the industrial decline beginning in the mid-1990s forced Hong Kong filmmakers to explore such cross-border strategies as working in Hollywood and re-situating Hong Kong cinema in Asia. In this context, Hong Kong-mainland co-productions represent the latest configuration of this assembling process.

If invocation of the myth of heterogeneity between equal components is to be avoided when discussing assemblage as heterogeneous emergence, there is need for great care to determine whether power and domination are, in fact, "explained by the multiplicity of objects given a central role and transported by vehicles which should be empirically visible" (Latour 2005, 83). In this respect, the parametrized assemblage theory proposed by DeLanda (2016, 18–26) can serve conceptually to detect the unequal distribution of power within an assemblage as well as its varying degree of openness. DeLanda suggests considering the degree of territorialization and deterritorialization and of coding and decoding in an assemblage. In this context, territorialization refers to "the determination of the spatial boundaries of a whole" as well as "the degree to which an assemblage's component parts are drawn from a homogeneous repertoire, or the degree to which an assemblage homogenises its own components." For instance, a conflict between two communities tends to increase the degree of territorialization, which manifests in intensively policed geographical boundaries and tightly controlled membership in the communities. Coding refers to "the role played by special expressive components in an assemblage in fixing the identity of a whole," a notable example being the linguistically coded rituals and regulations that contribute to the legitimacy of an authority structure.

In the present context, regarding the conceptualization of the ongoing assemblages of co-productions for Hong Kong filmmakers, a process is undoubtedly underway of increasing territorialization and coding as filmmakers pivot from more dynamic global and regional markets to a more homogeneous and stable nation-state market and become subject to rigorous censorship. Perhaps the most palpable coding tendency has been the large-scale disappearance of the Cantonese language, the prominent deployment and even fetishization of which the literary critic

Shih (2008, 14) identifies as the most significant feature of Hong Kong as a Sinophone community "where language and nationality are not coupled to reproduce the kinds of hegemonic, nationalistic obsessions with purity and authenticity." However, for the mainland, the cultural marketization and globalization to which co-productions belong are part of China's transformation in the post-cold war era through "managed globalization" (Yau 2015, 19) and "neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics" (Harvey 2005, 120). This transformation is defined by limited deterritorialization and decoding in which even the censorship system is defensive rather than offensive, that is, it regulates what cannot be filmed rather than what can be filmed. This mutual approach by the two sides provides the space for assembling and negotiating the co-productions. This large-scale trend is not, however, overwhelming but may be subverted and reversed at the micro-level at any time because of changes in the socio-political situation or even personal choice by individual filmmakers.[2] The variability in the co-production assemblage calls for an ontogenetic approach that traces the specific assemblage of individual films.

Accordingly, I take here an ontogenetic approach to Johnnie To's three co-produced action films —*Drug War* (2012), *Three* (2016), and *Chasing Dream* (2019)—to examine his efforts to engage critically with social issues by redeploying and developing his well-established aesthetic forms and styles in the co-production environment. Based on a formalist analysis and cultural interpretation of the works of this one director, I argue first that, while the co-productions took shape in conditions of restricted creativity and a palpable crisis of losing locality in general, To worked to bypass or even exploit these disadvantages to carve out a space for social commentary on Hong Kong society and, especially, neoliberal China. Second, I argue that these films document a transformation in To's style and themes that both manifests the impact of the co-production environment and maintains core features of his domestic works. Like other filmmakers, To has "gone north" primarily to tap into the considerable and rapidly growing Chinese market. His co-production path since the romantic comedy *Love for All Seasons* (2003) has been far less smooth than those of peers such as Peter Chan and Tsui Hark, and he has overtly criticized the censorship system, but he nevertheless became more deeply involved in co-productions during the 2010s, partly in response to the embarrassing failure of *Vengeance* (2009), his only international production to date. In 2010, he announced an exclusive partnership with Hairun Media Group, a powerful mainland television production house, that marked a transition in cooperative arrangements "from project-based collaboration to strategic alliance between business entities" (Sun 2018, 226).

Drug War: extraterritoriality represented by narrative doubling and Chinese suburban realism in surveillance

The first product of this partnership was *Drug War*, the crime thriller debut of To on the mainland. Thus, after a decade of testing the waters, To returned to the action film genre, which he, as a "director in action" (Teo 2007), has regarded a domain of authorship. As the movie opens, a fixed extreme long shot from a slight elevation shows an industrial district—something rare in Hong Kong cinema—where thick black smoke billows from a single-story factory with boilers that is surrounded by withered yellow weeds, trees, and utility poles. Soon, a car sweeps into the frame, and the following close-up introduces the character Timmy, played by Hong Kong star Louis Koo, driving in a semi-comatose state and vomiting as though drunk or poisoned. The scene then shifts to another protagonist, Zhang, the captain of the anti-drug police unit in Jinhai City, who is capturing drug traffickers at an expressway toll booth. Later, Zhang encounters

Timmy in a hospital and identifies him as a manufacturer of illegal drugs based on his ulcerated skin. In the subsequent interrogation, Timmy, seeking to avoid the death penalty for his crimes, confesses to Zhang that he is organizing a meeting between Haha, a smuggler in Jinhai, and Chang, an addict in the service of the drug kingpin Uncle Bill in Yuejiang. The silence with which Zhang greets Timmy's admission indicates the policeman's distrust, so Timmy proceeds to disclose another, even larger, illegal drug operation in Ezhou managed by two of his apprentices, who happen to be deaf and mute.

A mainland audience would quickly realize that these fictitious toponyms (Jinhai, Ezhou, and Yuejiang) correspond to Tianjin in northern China, Hubei in central China, and Canton in southern China. Thus, in its first quarter, the film describes a vast drug trafficking network extending throughout China at the center of which lies a Hongkonger. It also establishes a clear intertextual relationship with To's *Election* films (2005, 2006), in which a local gangster named Jimmy, also played by Koo, seeking permission to do business in the mainland, declares his willingness to be patriotic and is forced by the Chinese authorities to participate in the triad election. The transformation of Jimmy into Timmy is not explained, but the fact that the patriot has become a criminal hints at the instability of Hongkongers' performance of nationalism. Thus, perhaps his patriotism is only a matter of convenience and, once his collaboration with the police is over, what remains is a persistent, if latent, distrust of the Chinese authorities. As Fan (2019, 189) points out in an analysis of the first shot of the interrogation scene, in which Timmy looks directly into the camera when the police identify him as a "Hong Kong citizen," "this shot, together with the sound of the door slam" transforms the announcement of Timmy's citizenship into an accusation, "as though being a Hong Konger were the criminal charge itself." Thus, in its setup, the film binds the two protagonists, a Hong Kong drug cartel boss and a mainland policeman, tightly together in a forced cooperative relationship during the ensuing undercover operation. The conflict, however, persists, leaving it unclear whether Timmy's allegiance, demonstrated by his betrayals of his former accomplices, can be trusted.

The following twenty minutes of the film about two meetings are consistent with To's characteristic doubling and suspense. Realizing that Haha and Chang have not met, Timmy brings Zhang disguised as Chang to see the smuggler. The role-playing here seems simple in that Zhang/Chang only needs to convince HaHa that he is an addict. The suspense in this scene centers on a camera hidden in Zhang's cigarette case, which circulates among the three characters, and peaks when Haha picks up the case and Timmy snatches it from him to prevent the undercover operation from being revealed. The second meeting with (the real) Chang begins more smoothly as Zhang this time plays the role of Haha, imitating the smuggler's actions, gestures, and dialogue that he observed during the first meeting, but then Chang demands that Zhang/Haha take drugs, which he does, though Timmy intervenes to prevent Zhang from overdosing. After the meeting, Zhang nevertheless has a negative reaction to the drugs, and Timmy shows his goodwill again by helping him through it. The plotting strategy of doubling is again evident in subsequent police raids. Whereas the police arrest Haha in Jinhai, in Ezhou, Timmy's apprentices fiercely resist, killing several officers and escaping through a tunnel. Zhang is enraged at Timmy, blaming him for the botched raid since he did not mention the tunnel. To return to Zhang's good graces, Timmy offers a new enticement that the policeman finds difficult to refuse, revealing that the true power behind the Yuejiang drug cartel is a group of seven Hongkongers for whom Uncle Bill is merely a front.

This shocking betrayal of Timmy's compatriots, including his godfather and sworn brother, leads to the film's climax. The seven Hongkongers travel to the port that Haha controls as scheduled, which now is under the control of Zhang. One of the film's particularly striking spectacles

occurs when the Hongkongers ask Zhang/Haha to order all of the ships in the port to put to sea: with the ships' engines roaring in the soundtrack, nearly a dozen of them sail toward the open water in the background while, in the foreground, another swarm of ships prepares to follow. Excited by the spectacle and the favorable business prospects that it indicates, the Hongkongers vote to do business with the man whom they believe to be Haha. Here, their failure to understand the true nature of the spectacle, which amounts to a performance of the sovereignty of the Chinese state, foreshadows their disastrous fate. The next day, Timmy arranges so that nearly all of the characters gather outside a primary school in Jinhai's industrial district. In the two gunfights that follow, he betrays everyone, tricking the Hongkongers and his apprentices into firing at the police. The plan is almost successful, with all of the other characters perishing, but Timmy then realizes that he is handcuffed to the dead Zhang.

My account of *Drug War* highlights the prominence of doubling—to which Bordwell (2013) draws attention as a typical feature of Milkyway films—throughout the film's four-act structure. Thus, in addition to Zhang's two personas (as Chang and HaHa),

> There are two truckers, two cops tailing them, two deaf-mute killers, two raids, two traffic encounters with the gang, two times that Zhang must trust Tommy and release him .[…] even the climax consists of not one but two gun battles, the first in front of the school, the second in a nearby street.

There is also the less obvious but no less significant doubling represented by the protagonists Timmy and Zhang. At first, the two seem complete opposites rather than doubles. Thus, on the one hand, Timmy from the outset is represented as fragile and unscrupulous. His fragility is a product both of his lifestyle as a drug manufacturer, which leaves him with scarred skin that Zhang notices, and of the fact that, as a criminal from Hong Kong, he endures constant surveillance, suspicion, and even harassment by the state. Timmy's unscrupulousness is evident in both his strong impulse to survive and escape his seemingly inescapable fate and his disregard for any fealty, group solidarity, or sense of morality to extricate himself from his forced collaboration with the Chinese police. Zhang, by contrast, is a consistently robust and scrupulous character. Embodying the power and justice of the state, he is both courageous and astute, capturing criminals with aplomb and advancing his intricate plan step by step until the awful climax. Whereas Timmy's allegiance and identity remain flexible, Zhang always takes a firm stand as a PRC policeman, though he proves himself adept at role-playing. In these respects, he displays little of the moral ambiguity and psychological melancholy characteristic of To's previous heroes. The extreme dualism in characterization and plotting is summarized by Fan (2019, 185) as two imaginary distinctions, "law and lawlessness, humanity and animality."

Interestingly, in interviews, To deliberately highlights *Drug War*'s subversion of previous Hong Kong films—many of which, conversely, opposed noble Hongkongers to evil mainland criminals—describing it as an accurate reflection of ongoing changes in criminal activities and even in the relationship between the city and the mainland (*Time-Weekly* 2013). However, such a reversal of the stereotype is, in fact, neither a subversion nor a reflection of social reality; rather, the film's subversiveness emerges from its bold, even exaggerated repetition and performance of the stereotype itself in a form that caters to the censors' requirements regarding the depiction of police officers. As Chu (2015, 199) rightly indicates, the characterizations in *Drug War*, too extreme to be realistic, should be understood as "an absurdly unexpected as well as an unexpectedly absurd arrangement made indifferently by the To and Wai [Ka-Fai] duo."

However, this explanation is insufficient to account for the similarities that underlie the apparent contrast between Timmy and Zhang. The former, an outlaw in terms of both his drug dealing and

his suspicious Hong Kong citizenship, lives what Agamben describes as a "bare life," existing in an exceptional state such that he may be killed, cast into suspicion, or maltreated without his attacker being punished. Meanwhile, Zhang occupies the same lawless position in an exceptional state, that of the sovereign defined by his power to make emergency decisions. As Agamben (1998, 86) describes this relationship,

> The sovereign and *homo sacer* present two symmetrical figures that have the same structure and are correlative: the sovereign is the one with respect to whom all men are potentially *homines sacri*, and *homo sacer* is the one with respect to whom all men act as sovereigns.

In this regard, the film is more like an elaborate political theater that visualizes sovereignty's exceptional status, which remains invisible in the normal juridical-political order, in a series of scenes of lawlessness. The role-playing during the undercover operations undermines Zhang's conception of himself as a Chinese police officer by transforming him into a criminal who performs more illegal activities than any single criminal on the screen, as is particularly evident in the scene where he takes drugs during the meeting with Chang. As a criminal more criminal than any other, he enjoys impunity merely because of his identity as it is arbitrarily defined by sovereignty. In this way, the film dismantles the myth of sovereignty to reveal its fundamentally violent nature. To indicated his awareness that this aspect of *Drug War* is ideologically suspect and carries potential political risks in a discussion of the two samples of the film for censorship:

> We edited two versions and submitted the first one. If it didn't work, we were going to use the second one … In the first one, the policeman takes drugs while in the other one, not at all. We sent the first one, with the drugged policeman, and it passed [the censors], with only the frontal shots [of the policeman taking drugs] needing to be cut. (*Time-Weekly* 2013)

From this perspective, Timmy, living a bare life, and Zhang, the representative of state power, "are no longer standing on the two opposite sides of the dual axes between law and lawlessness, humanity and animality" but in the same lawless and feral position. In this doubling of the protagonists lies the film's power, in that it not only exposes the mythical violence of sovereignty but also shows it to be "instantiated precisely by their mutual negotiation, collaboration and reconfiguration" as Fan (2019, 189–190) argues. *Drug War* thus draws attention to the affinity between the two figures. On the one hand, in like manner as the law includes a bare life by excluding it, Timmy is branded an "extraterritorial life" by the Chinese state; on the other hand, only such a presupposition of extraterritoriality can trigger the performative process of sovereignty. To present this symmetrical affinity, To frames the protagonists symmetrically to suggest "that the two are occupying the same liminal position between law and lawlessness, humanity and animality" (Fan 2019, 190). Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of this affinity is Zhang's statement that "live or die, I will be with you" after Timmy leaks the information about the seven Hongkongers. Interestingly, though suspicious, Zhang chooses to collaborate with Timmy repeatedly since his sovereignty will "die" without Timmy to activate its mythical performance. Thus, through a complex narrative system based on doubling, To manages both to depart from the usual plot for a police-gangster movie and to circumvent the censors by making the affinity between bare life and sovereignty the core of this co-production project. In this sense, as Fan (2019, 181–194) demonstrates, the film is a model of Hong Kong filmmakers' continuing "socio-political authorship" in co-productions.

Regarding visual style, many critics have described the film as a distinct departure from the norm in To's oeuvre in terms of its realism. However, this description is based on a misunderstanding since, apart from highly stylized and surrealist works such as *PTU* (2003), To developed a sustained

realist style through movies such as *Expect the Unexpected* (1998) and *Breaking News* (2004). Showing a preference for location shooting in the metropolis instead of visual extremes and ornamentation, these films depict the cityscape as it appears on a regular day with a kind of urban realism and authenticity manifest in their raw settings as well as dynamic camera movement. *Drug War* is the latest version of this tradition in that, as Bordwell (2013) observes, "shot in wintry Jinhai, a northern port city, and in the central city of Erzhou, it presents stretches of industrial wasteland and bleak superhighways. As a result, To's characteristic audacious stylization gives way to a bare-bones look" that sometimes even delivers "a mundane, documentary quality." More precisely, what emerges here is a kind of Chinese suburban realism.

Continuing, rather than breaking with, the norm of unpolished settings established in previous realist films, To in *Drug War* represents a northern China that is very different geographically from Hong Kong. Shooting in Tianjin, a northern metropolis, To places the main story in the suburban industrial area. The wintry atmosphere, withered vegetation, and sparse low buildings establish the film's chilly, desolate, and scattered tone. From the first, To's visual composition highlights the liminality of the suburb as a space between city and countryside, culture and nature. The introduction of Zhang at the toll booth soon leads to an empty field following the drug dealers' escape. In a detached manner, To remotely records the chase through a bare wide-angle lens. At the edge of the frame, the background slightly curved by the short-focus lens, some buildings, tower cranes, and telegraph poles appear blurry, suggesting the ongoing urbanization process. In the foreground, the criminals and the policemen behind them are crossing the field. Here To provides a third kind of extraterritoriality—in addition to those between outlaws and police and between Hong Kong and China—namely, the suburbs' extraterritoriality in relation to the urban environment. Conceptually, the suburb is defined by the city proper through a paradoxical exclusive inclusion mechanism: retaining, in part, both its barbarism and its uncivilized nature, it is an area waiting to be conquered entirely by urban civilization. To's reverse gaze toward the city, defined by the camera position, thus creates an extraterritorial perspective through which to reflect on the urbanization in full swing in contemporary China. More importantly, the suburb is incorporated into the storytelling, not only as a place where outlaws practice their skills but also as a contact zone between them and Chinese state sovereignty, further reinforcing the film's theme of extraterritoriality. Unsurprisingly, then, in the film's climax, Timmy chooses an industrial area as the place to stage his escape plan, again reflecting the film's liminality between civilization and barbarism, law and lawlessness. To the extent that the movement from the suburb to the city's police station in the metropolis represents the process of subjection to state governance, then what the criminals expect is none other than a counter-movement from the suburb to the wilderness.

Turning now to camera movement, To's domestic realism films are characterized by dynamic and unstable shots, while the camera in *Drug War* remains stationary and placid, though not totally static. In this film, To's preferred position for the camera seems to be in a remote corner so as to record the characters in a distant and indifferent way. Considering the ubiquitous state surveillance suggested by the film, the choice of stable composition is not arbitrary. In fact, as early as Timmy's first appearance in the film, To deploys a surveillance shot of him driving down the street, showing his bare-life existence as it is captured by the state's technological governmentality and also foreshadowing the significance of surveillance as a motif. The overwhelming power of surveillance is also apparent in a literal sense during the undercover project as monitoring equipment constantly records the criminals' images and utterances. Likewise, in almost all of the sequences set at the hotel, factories, and ports, To depicts the care with which the police install or instruct Timmy to install monitoring equipment, his insertion of the raw materials of surveillance into the textual

composition also contributing to the film's visual roughness. At times, the feed from the monitoring equipment occupies the entire frame, but it appears more often in a displayer placed in the center of the frame, with frequent over-the-shoulder shots suggesting the presence of the surveillance.

To also highlights the centrality of surveillance in a more oblique way, namely, treating it as the principal syntax in the film's overall visual orchestration, especially when To places the camera furtively in a corner at an elevated or downward angle suggesting its proximity to or identification with the monitoring equipment. In such moments, To's filming enacts the POV and perspectives of surveillance, rendering even the scenes that do not feature monitoring—and, thus, the camera's whole narration—seemingly culpable in the victimization of the characters. In sum, in *Drug War*, To presents urban realism using his established palette of styles into a unique form of Chinese suburban realism. In the unpolished, documentary-like suburban location shooting, its rough and chaotic state reflecting its liminality between civilization and barbarism, then, the camera's relatively stable, furtive, and angled movements enact the ubiquitous surveillance, articulating the process through which a transborder Hong Kong subject is increasingly captured by the state's sovereign power.

Three and *Chasing Dream*: toward a studio aesthetics

To's two most recent co-production action films, *Three* and *Chasing Dream*, both shot in the studio, demonstrate his current effort to develop a studio aesthetics. *Three* was filmed at the Panyu Film and Television Base in Canton province. In 2016, Milkyway Image and Hairun Media Group established Milkyway's mainland film base in Jiangsu province; its debut production was *Chasing Dream*. Earlier, at Panyu Base, To had made *Office* (2015), a musical adapted from the stage play *Design for Living* by Sylvia Chang and Edward Lam. As the first example of To's studio aesthetics, *Office* shows some key transformations in his style. Location shooting defined Hong Kong new cinema beginning in the 1980s, however stylized it became, marking a contrast with the previous preference for studio shooting. Location shooting has also defined To's films up to and including *Drug War*, which, as just discussed, achieves a kind of translocality in its realist representation of the Chinese suburb. By contrast, To's recent studio films depict a fundamental dislocality, showing a tendency to abstraction in terms of representing no specific identifiable site, whether in Hong Kong or the mainland. This abstract quality contributes to a more secure atmosphere for To's transborder assemblages. Indeed, compared with *Drug War*, *Office* and To's subsequent studio productions have faced little interference from mainland censors. However, To's efforts to infuse his works with a critical quality in the framework of studio aesthetics are still in evidence. Thus, in *Office*, which tells a workplace story of a Hong Kong fashion trading company in the context of the 2008 financial crisis, To shows great enthusiasm for abstract spatial representation. Highlighting the company's power hierarchy, the film develops a kind of vertical aesthetics that not only "allegorizes a dynamic of economic polarization between China and Hong Kong" but also, crucially, shapes the film's expressionistic mise-en-scène of hyper-capitalism as "skyscrapers, office blocks, and an elevator straight to the top of the building represent forms of mobility that lead into a bright new future just as they emphasize the ever-widening chasm between the powerful and the powerless" (Khoo 2019, 176). With the imagery of a bright, glorious glass-and-steel office building like a dreamworld, To presents a dystopian allegory of the production space in which contemporary capitalism operates. The transparent glass, a metaphor for the discourse of enlightenment and historical progress since the mid-nineteenth century (Buck-Morss 1989, 80–89; Bishop 2019), now makes the office a disciplinary apparatus, a panopticon at the center of which stands an enormous rotating clock projecting its bold gaze all round. The bare steel supporting the

clock and the building as a whole, with its severe, cold geometric shapes, thus reinforces the mechanical appearance of the space. By staging and arranging this purely artificial studio space, I suggest, To delivers an abstract critique of the living conditions in neoliberal Hong Kong and China.

With *Three*, To returned to his signature field, the crime thriller. Set in a Hong Kong hospital and unfolding over six hours of narrative time, the film depicts a three-sided game among the chief inspector, Ken, an injured gangster, Shun, and a doctor, Tong. Shun has been undeservedly shot in the head by Ken's subordinate, and the inspector has escorted him to the hospital and kept him under strict surveillance. Disregarding Tong's warning that he will need an operation within the next six hours, Shun tries to rebuild his relationship with his erstwhile gangster associates with Tong's help. He claims to be seeking a medical consultation, but the film hints and later confirms that Shun's only concern is revenge against the police, even at the cost of his life. Ken, eager to protect his subordinate from the consequences of shooting Shun, does not hesitate to fabricate evidence or exploit his police contacts and appears willing even to murder Shun. Tong, depicted as nervous and haunted by her failures as a surgeon, is torn between the police and the gangsters: her duty as a citizen is to cooperate with the authorities, but her professional responsibility demands that she persuade Shun to agree to the operation. The film recalls *Breaking News*, both in the tight-knit narrative focused on the three protagonists' interactions and in its formal proximity to the classical unities of action, time, and place characteristic of neoclassical European theater. In fact, with its studio aesthetics, *Three* goes even further in its reflective theatricality in that the hospital setting is not depicted as a collection of separate consulting rooms, inpatient wards, and a pharmacy. Rather, public beds and workbenches occupy a single open space like a theater stage.

What unfolds on this stage are the protagonists' interwoven tragedies of identity. The allegiance of Shun and his accomplices to their identities as gangsters and the ethical principle of brotherhood, both recurrent motifs in To's works, combine to transform the hospital into a battlefield in the climax. From the start, Ken is presented as a corrupt policeman, a common figure in To and Milkyway's urban crime thrillers since *The Longest Night* (1998). In particular, by giving Shun the same memorable line that the policeman Ho speaks in *PTU*, "the person who wears the uniform is our brother," To indicates the similarity between the two crooked officers and, thereby, undercuts Ken. Visually, the cold-hearted Ken, seeking to engineer Shun's death, is constantly shown in a gloomy walkway, silent and still, with sharp shadows cast on his body and the wall. Further, Ken's powerful visage is rendered grotesque by frequent close-ups distorted in wide-angle lenses and angular shots. By contrast, Shun is usually shown in a brightly lit hospital lobby, with the evenly diffused and saturated lighting tending to enhance the attractiveness of his already handsome face. Thus, To invests distinct attitudes—irony towards Ken and sympathy towards Shun—in the contrasting visual compositions of the characters and their settings to form a poignantly sarcastic riposte to the trope of righteous police protecting society from vicious criminals. Tong, a new immigrant from the mainland, desperately tries to maintain her professionalism and vocation to save people though the stress that she is under causes her to make repeated mistakes. Even worse, Ken forces her to drug Shun so that he will go along with the inspector's murderous plan. During the climactic gunfight, a desperate young man left paralyzed after a botched surgery by Tong attempts to commit suicide by throwing himself down the stairs only to find that he has recovered from the paralysis as a result. This absurd miracle seems to mock Tong's identity as a doctor. Both Ken and Tong, having abandoned their professional ethics, struggle to maintain their power and authority while making mistake after mistake until the final crisis. In an interview in 2016 when the film was released at the Taipei Film Festival, To related it to the situation in Hong Kong:

> Why did I make this film? Over the past few years, values have changed dramatically in Hong Kong. Many wrong things have not been corrected, and, even worse, various reasons are used to maintain what is wrong. The result is more and more mistakes. Current Hong Kong is far different from what it was. (Wu 2016)

This statement may help to situate this film as a critical representation of Hong Kong society in crisis, an impression that the background music deployed in the climax sequence reinforces. I refer to "*Zhi Hu Zhe Ye*," a song by Tayu Lo originally and covered by Ivana Wong Yuen Chi in this film. The song's title consists of four modal particles in classical Chinese strung together in a formally meaningless phrase that is widely used to describe an old-fashioned person, to whom Wong sings the plaintive exhortation "now look at what our young people are talking about/and finally you should think about why they do things like that." For an audience well-acquainted with Hong Kong society, the lyrics, especially in light of To's assessment of Hong Kong, immediately suggest many possibilities. Perhaps To is calling out the Chinese and SAR governments, like the out-of-touch target of the song, because, rather than trying to understand the young people and their demands for civil rights, officials assume that they are hoodlums, in like manner as Ken assumes that Shun, as a criminal, lacks human decency. Alternatively, perhaps Tong insinuates that the pro-democracy camp has lost the ability to cure, or appeal to, the recalcitrant young; or, considering her mainland origin, perhaps this character refers to the governor from the north.

However, this reading of the film as social criticism is complicated by its fundamental ambiguity, which manifests in the stories told by the talkative and erudite Shun, an exceptional figure among To's usually taciturn heroes. For example, Shun alludes to "Russell's chicken," a thought problem formulated by the philosopher and mathematician Bertrand Russell concerning the limits of inductive knowledge and conclusions based on precedent (the chicken is not suspicious when the man who has been feeding it one day comes to kill it). In the context of the film, this allusion may hint at the changing status of any of the three protagonists, but it is also comically misunderstood by the old patient near Shun as a chicken dish called *lo sung gai* because of its similarity to the pronunciation of *lo sou gai* in Cantonese. The allusion to Russell's chicken could also be interpreted as To's advance notice of the film's unconventional (for the genre) narrative style. Further, the film's studio aesthetics strengthen the textual ambiguity by avoiding reference to any specific place and event so that any social criticism that the film may contain remains vague, fragmented, and even contradictory as well as reliant on the various decoding practices of the viewers. For example, the significance of "*Zhi Hu Zhe Ye*," the background music just mentioned, remains uncertain since no hint of generational conflict is apparent in the diegetic world. Thus, while the film can be described as inspired by social reality, it can hardly be said to provide a straightforward representation or criticism of current Hong Kong society.

The four-minute-long take that marks the climax of the final gunfight is also inconsistent with a realist reading of *Three*. The conflict breaks out suddenly in a hallway in the hospital and immediately involves dozens of characters who shoot, run, dodge, and writhe in slow motion. Since To was unwilling to use overcranking (shooting at a faster rate than normal) to achieve the effect, the actors required two months of special training to slow down the rhythm of their movements. Seemingly appearing here—or, more precisely, reappearing—is To's long-standing preference for cold weapons and indifference to advanced technologies such as digital filming (Sun 2011). Even so, this scene rarely conforms to the logic of perceptual realism: besides the slow motion that creates a strong sense of surrealism and fictionality—especially the bodies floating lightly in the air—the dynamic inconsistency caused by the actors' various rates of motion also prevents the film from achieving the uniform and synchronous effect that To sought. In addition, since he does not

rely on the editing to effect a basic transition, To resorts to rapid panning, which by nature creates visual jerkiness. To does not eschew CGI entirely, though; thus the ellipses of unnecessary, redundant scenes required by To's laconic narrative are achieved through the technique of image acceleration, which also serves to show inanimate objects floating in the air as if no longer subject to gravity. Of relevance when considering this distinctive and somewhat odd visual composition is the fact that the year of *Three*'s release, 2016, coincided with the establishment of Milkyway's mainland film base for use in co-production projects such as the 3D-IMAX blockbuster *King of Kings*, with a story based on the origin myth of Chinese ethnicity. It is easy to imagine that these fantasies reliant on studio aesthetics, a genre new to To, will bring him into an unfamiliar field with deep dependence on visual special effects and, especially, digital film technology. Therefore, the slow-motion live-action performance in *Three* is more than simply a parody of the over-use of the over-cranking technique in contemporary action film or reconfirmation of his iconic visual composition of gestural performance to incorporate slowness. Rather, at a point in To's career when he is preparing to enter a new production field, this sequence in *Three* seems better explained as a symptom of anxiety regarding his juxtaposition of slowness and rapidness, of material corporality and mechanical manipulability, and of analog and digital filming technology.

To brought his staging focus back to bodily representation in *Chasing Dream*, his latest co-production, which takes the form of a romance between an MMA fighter, Tiger, and a pop singer, Cuckoo. In his assemblage of action film and musical—genres that share the dual structure consisting of bodily spectacle and narrative, To even simplifies the plotting of the love story as steadily intensifying mutual understanding and support between the protagonists without the twists and turns typical of a romance. The result is a high proportion of action sequences—musical numbers and boxing scenes—fit together at a breath-taking pace. To a large extent, *Chasing Dream* can be viewed as a continuation of *Office* in terms of the filmmaker's concern with lives left in disarray by Chinese neoliberalism, though the focus shifts from the transparent and mechanical glass-iron labyrinth that represents a pathological utopian space for capitalism in *Office* to the bodily performance of *Chasing Dream*.

Certainly, the space in which the characters act remains a significant aspect of the latter film, and To invests it with a sense of fanaticism and a second kind of transparency in an age of explosive mediascapes. Cuckoo's stage and Tiger's fight ring require studio settings that are literal theatrical stages, which are illuminated by spotlights, surrounded by flashing LED screens, and thronged by fanatical audiences with light sticks and raucous cheers. However, these spaces of impressive visual and auditory live performances represent merely the first level of the mise-en-scène. A second and more significant virtual space is created as these depictions of reality shows about boxing and musical performance are captured by cameras and broadcast in real time to countless televisions, computers, and mobile phones. Often, the characters watch each other through these devices. In the film's opening sequence, for example, Ma Qing, Tiger's master and the principal of a bankrupt boxing school, watches Tiger box on an old TV; later, Tiger, in voluntary retirement, watches a TV advertisement promoting an upcoming boxing match in which Ma Qing is participating. More frequently, it is Tiger and Cuckoo who watch each other through electronic interfaces. To depict this digital viewing experience, To frequently deploys a shot-reverse-shot between the virtual figures in these interfaces and the actual characters in front of the cinematic camera, sometimes even creating shots of characters looking at the camera. His approach here is distant from the classical Godardian strategy of reflexivity deployed in political modernist films to break the illusion of transparent film narration. A much closer analogy is with contemporary life, specifically, the widespread use of this technique in various forms of live broadcasting to create the illusion of transparency and real-time

co-presence with the audience. In an analysis of contemporary media technologies, Virilio (2000, 55) distinguishes two kinds of transparency. On the one hand, transparency has widely been defined in terms of "that which light can easily pass through" or as "that which allows us clearly to perceive objects through its very density," such as a window pane. On the other hand, the meaning of transparency extends to "the new concept of real-time interface, since now it is the transparency not of light rays (solar or electrical) but only of the speed of elementary particles (electron, photon …) propagated at the very speed of light." In this sense, To captures in *Office* and *Chasing Dream* precisely the changing nature of transparency or, to put it more accurately, the co-existence of these two kinds of transparency, one drawing attention to the architectural transparent of the glass-steel building, and the other presenting a transparent world devoid of spatial boundaries or temporal distance amid the pervasive real-time interfaces.

It is in this transparent space that Tiger's and Cuckoo's bodily images circulate and perform. Accordingly, To accelerates his audiovisual orchestration to a fierce speed in terms of both fast editing and the vigorous movements of bodies and other objects. However, as in *Office*, To constantly articulates or implies a critical distance from these bodily spectacles. In *Chasing Dream*, Cuckoo's original songs have been plagiarized by her former boyfriend, Qu, who is now a super idol. While onstage, she is repeatedly evaluated as being "very much in Qu's style." Here, the inversion of the authentic and the counterfeit serves to deliver a comical sense of irony. Irony also emerges as another singer returns to the stage in increasingly thick layers of protective gear as she repeatedly aggravates an injury caused by energetic dancing, her signature phrase being "but it was totally worth it in the name of music." As for Tiger, his continuously wounded body shows the great risks associated with his choice of career, and a doctor advises him in plain terms to retire. Tiger keeps telling his powerful agent "I won't fight anymore," but he is forced to return to the ring again and again. To explicitly connects him with previous Milkyway heroes through the unhomelike setting of the warehouse that serves as his home. Though now living in a capitalist *jianghu* rather than To's police-gangster *jianghu*, his hero is still passive and vulnerable and struggling to escape a destructive destiny. It seems, then, that To does provide an escape for his characters, a regressive one leading back to their ostensibly pure origins. Geographically, these origins are located in remote towns or the countryside. Even the characters' names—Tiger, Cuckoo, and Horse (the surname of Ma Qing)—suggest a rustic primitiveness far removed from urban life. In a telling contrast with the electronic world of the metropolis, the boxing school where Tiger first trained even suffers a power outage when it is unable to pay the bills. It is in this space, free from the pollution of artificial light and sound, that To stages a master-disciple duel between Tiger and Ma. Whereas boxing in the urban space has taken the form of spectacle driven by the economy of attention, this duel, with no spectators, plays out under beautiful "natural" lighting in patient long takes. To some extent, it seems that To here reiterates the "primitive passions" that Chow (1995) finds in many contemporary works of fifth-generation mainland directors that conjure up a pure and intact origin for the characters, usually in the countryside, valorizing negatively the trauma of modernity.

However, after their respective odysseys, To draws Tiger and Cuckoo back into the world of spectacle, and even the solitary master Ma Qing has to participate in a boxing match in order to earn the bonus to re-establish his school. Now, To sets up another, and more critical, redemption for the protagonists, namely, love. As an internal form of resistance to the spectacle world, different from the external criticism represented by the rustic primitivity of the characters' origins, love drives Tiger and Cuckoo persistently to search out and touch each other's material body regardless of the ubiquitous and transparent electronic interfaces. Only when Tiger, beset by his opponent,

feels Cuckoo's authentic voices and sights in the audience, can he turn the defeat into a victory. Obviously, this victory is another kind of regressive salvation from the spectacle, abstract body back to the affective, concrete body. However, such regression also suggests that the film has not, after all, subverted the regime of spectacle, in which the body serves merely as an interchangeable symbol, but merely evades or overturns it by resorting to the love myth with its implication of the actual co-existence of affective bodies. To put it differently, love here has no possibility of living up to the promise of inner redemption with which To seems to endow it when, through the voice of a compère commenting on Tiger's unexpected victory, he describes it as a "miracle." At the end of the film, Cuckoo throws away the microphone, abandoning the opportunity to advance her career, and runs to Tiger, who is in the midst of an uneven fight with a seemingly invincible rival. The character of the assistant director in the film, having long waited for a chance to direct, grabs the camera for the first time and starts to film the live broadcast of this touching scene.

Thus, even this love has been recaptured and mediated by the society of spectacle. Moreover, To seems to make here a reflexive gesture to himself, in that he shares with his character the role of director. Thus, in a tone that mixes sentiment with irony, To articulates his ambivalence toward the society of spectacle. In fact, the film's plotting structure, as a loop connecting captivity in the transparent space of spectacle with regression, shows such ambivalence above all. On the one hand, To not only presents the pathological living conditions of his characters, who are reduced to spectacles that fuel the neoliberalist economy and depend on new technologies, but also attempts to rescue them by providing regressive routes, either love or a return home. On the other hand, he seems clearly to realize that the society of spectacle is an inescapable destiny, to such an extent that even his own filmmaking practice is complicit. His sober pessimism leads him to involve his characters in the transparent world again and again and also drives him to acknowledge, implicitly or explicitly, the mythical nature of the redemption routes that he suggests, especially the one that leads through love, and to cast a dark shadow on the the film's fiery and overwrought atmosphere.

Conclusion

For Hong Kong filmmakers, co-productions with the PRC have been taking the form of transborder assemblages characterized by increasing territorialization and coding. The result has been films that show a palpable crisis related to a loss of locality with the large-scale disappearance of some perennial features of Hong Kong cinema such as dialog in Cantonese, the topophilia reflected in location shooting amid the urban topography of Hong Kong, the representation of identity as flexible and morally ambiguous, the thematization of individual experiences of trauma, memory, and amnesia, and allegorical references to the city's history. My analysis of To's three co-production action films to date reveals how he negotiates with the restricted creative conditions of this production mode in various ways in order to carve out space for critical perspectives on Hong Kong as a society in crisis, contemporary Chinese neoliberalism, and the relationship between Hong Kong and mainland China. These films also provide insight into how To has developed his aesthetic style as a genre auteur. Intertextual allusions, in the form either of large-scale plot structures and visual styles such as realism and surrealism or small-scale elements such as specific aspects of characterization and dialogue, are pervasive in his co-productions. I have argued here that these allusions can and should be considered features of To's co-production assemblages in a new context. Approached this way, fundamentally, the allusions are contingently reliable materials for his new forms of expression, which in effect demonstrate that he remains an innovator worthy of continued scholarly attention.

I acknowledge that my observations regarding To's works are not necessarily applicable to all Hong Kong-mainland co-production action films. Understandably focused on an area in which local filmmakers remain competitive, Hong Kong action cinema has increasingly followed a dubious path in the direction of co-production blockbusters, such as the popular war and disaster films of Dante Lam, Tsui Hark, and Andrew Lau in recent years. It seems that, for many Hong Kong filmmakers, the time has come to apply skills and experiences gained in the traditional Hong Kong film industry, such as picturesque cinematography, efficient editing, and compelling orchestration of action, to visualize a new masculine body to symbolize the rising nation. Compared with many of his contemporaries, To seems to have found "going north" considerably more fraught on account of the difficult-to-reconcile conflict between the strong and consistent criticism in his allegorical films, especially of the nationalist mythical violence, and the industrial re-nationalization in which he is forced to participate. However, the jury is still out on the extent of the compromise that this re-nationalization entails. A comprehensive study of this topic must include a series of specific, case-by-case research projects. The same is true of the assemblage theory as an ontogenetic approach that emphasizes the heterogeneity and contingency of social and cultural associations. Such a comprehensive account is beyond the scope of the present study, which, nevertheless, helps to corroborate the validity of the assemblage theory as a reliable method for use in future investigations.

Notes

1. For example, Bettinson (2020, 20) writes: "Johnnie To conceived a devilish feint, plying SARFT with counterfeit screenplays. Wholly innocuous and sanitized, these ersatz scripts served their purpose by floating through SARFT's approvals system unmolested. Once granted SARFT's imprimatur, To ditched the faux screenplay and reverted to Hong Kong scripting practice." Some other filmmakers like Peter Chan only conduct self-censorship during preproduction, granting themselves creative autonomy without restrictions during filming.
2. A case in point is that To and Milkyway Image in the 2010s had sustained its local production projects including *Life without Principle* (2011), *Blind Detective* (2013), and *Trivisa* (2016), even as the focus of production had gradually shifted to the mainland.

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