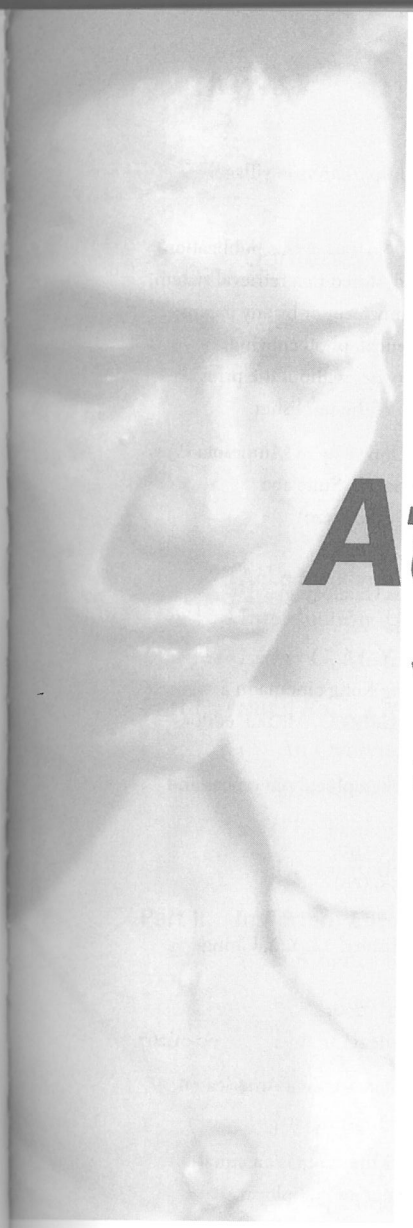

At Full Speed

Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World

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CHAPTER TWO

The Emergence of the Hong Kong New Wave

Hector Rodriguez

Writing in the Hong Kong periodical *Film Biweekly* in October 1979, the editor, Law Wai-ming, heralded "the beginning of a new era" in local cinema, an artistic revolution presumably ushered in by the films of the young directors Tsui Hark, Ronnie Yu, Alex Cheung, Ann Hui, and Patrick Tam. This rhetoric of rupture and transformation crystallized around the concept of a "Hong Kong New Wave"; Law described the emerging filmmakers as "a collective symbol of all that is new in the industry," whose presence marked the birth of a genuine art cinema movement.[1] Employing similar terms, many Hong Kong film critics shaped the "Hong Kong New Wave" as a category of classification, description, evaluation, and debate.

My argument reconstructs the avatars of the idea of a "Hong Kong New Wave" by examining its emergence as an object of critical discussion. This essay is not an exercise in aesthetic appreciation but a sociological analysis of the role that a vocabulary of aesthetic appreciation has played in the institution of film criticism and (sometimes) the self-understanding of filmmakers. The discourse of the New Wave principally arose within a critical community that had already developed a network of protocols, commitments, concepts, and institutions in the late 1960s and 1970s. I describe this sociohistorical background as a "film culture field."

My aim is to command an overview of the cultural arena where intellectuals and artists worked to define and defend various criteria of cultural legitimacy, to discuss and refine their shared identity, to play out their emotional investment in the idea of culture, to elaborate and address their implied audience, and to establish their moral and aesthetic authority. The result of these efforts was a practice of criticism and a set of enduring public institutions where that practice could unfold. At stake in these activities were the mission of the film critic, the relationship between culture and society, and the identity of Hong Kong itself.

Cognitive Praxis

It is convenient to begin by characterizing in general terms the concept of a "cultural field," which in my account includes several components: (1) an institutional system of formal organizations and informal circles that may, but need not, contain codified membership requirements and internal hierarchies; (2) a set of values and commitments directed toward shared identities, intellectual traditions, and patterns of emotional investment in common concerns; (3) a network of shared topics and practical protocols ranging from fixed norms to indeterminate rules of thumb; (4) a collective memory constituted not only by early efforts at creating the field but also by "great achievements" or "golden periods" in its later evolution; and (5) a way of relating to other social institutions and groups that provide material support and inspiration for, or enter into conflict with, members of the field. The self-identity of a field frequently constitutes an external social phenomenon as an other. Characteristically not an imaginary or purely discursive construction but a real entity (an institution, organization, doctrine, way of life, person or type of person, etc.), the other is excluded from membership in the field and often also provides a target for the group's ambivalence, hostility, contempt, hatred, competition, enmity, mistrust, or fear.

The concept of a field therefore comprises institutional, emotional, ethical, and cognitive backgrounds. In his contribution to this anthology, Law Kar has outlined the institutional system of the film culture field in Hong Kong. It includes film pages in cultural magazines (*Chinese Student Weekly*); columns in daily newspapers (*Ming Pao Daily*, *New Life Evening News*, and the *Hong Kong Standard*, among others); screen journals and magazines (*Close Up Film Review* and *Film Biweekly*); film forums and student organizations biased toward auteur and avant-garde cinema (the College Cine Club, the Film Guard Association, and the Phoenix Cine Club); humanities programs in tertiary education institutions (the Chinese University of Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Baptist College, and, more recently, the Hong Kong Academy for the Performing Arts); film and drama courses in independent organizations (the Film Culture Centre and the Hong Kong Arts Centre); events like the Independent Short Film Competition and the Hong Kong International Film Festival; and, especially, the annual publications and retrospectives of the Hong Kong International Film Festival. These public spheres often interacted with one another. Many of the critics who had collaborated in *Close Up* throughout the 1970s also joined the newly established

Film Biweekly when the former folded in 1979. Articles by members of associations like the College Cine Club and Film Guard also appeared in the *Chinese Student Weekly*, whose contributors would often also write for *Film Biweekly*, occupy important roles (such as editors and programmers) in the International Film Festival, enroll in film and communication departments in institutions of higher education, and write regular columns for newspapers. Thus, the institutional nexus of the film culture field comprised an interlocking network of public spheres where critics and aspiring filmmakers came together as a community with a shared interest in film as art.[2]

An implication of the concept of a cultural field is that its discourses and institutions cannot be wholly characterized in isolation from each other. The film culture field was a total context of activities, organizations, and interests that interlocked with, and ramified into, the explicit concepts of the critical community. This interconnectedness between ideas and institutions can be brought out by describing the Hong Kong film culture field as a process of detaching criticism from the institutions of the commercial cinema, and its critical methods and vocabularies were integral to this institutional process. Contributors to the *Chinese Student Weekly* often saw themselves as representatives of something like an ideal of "pure culture," not bound by the profit imperative. Instead of gossip columns, semifictional hagiographies of famous stars, and glossy promotionals of upcoming films, critics produced in-depth analyses, personal reminiscences, translations of foreign articles, and discussion forums on new films, auteurs, and local industry trends. The self-conscious goal of cultural autonomy from market imperatives underpinned the activities of members of the field. Frequently recounted and sometimes idealized, these protracted early efforts to consolidate film culture institutions, initially conducted with no government assistance, became part of the critical community's institutional memory and buttressed its cultural seriousness and dedication. Recollection was a crucial element in the process of collective identity formation. Thus, the 1960s have been retrospectively spoken of as a "golden age" in Hong Kong film criticism, presumably characterized by the sheer energy, intelligence, and independence of its practitioners. Critics often remember how *Film Biweekly* consistently published academic, independent, and professional reviews rather than "publicity blurbs."[3] The film culture field generated its own institutional memory to sustain its members' shared identity.

The self-understanding of the critical community was thus bound up with its cultivated autonomy from dominant institutions of economic power. Their defense of the integrity and autonomy of art, their putative seriousness

of purpose and indifference to the pursuit of profit or popular approval, defined the film culture field in ways that reflected pervasive hostility, or at least ambivalence, toward its other: the cinematic marketplace. Critics thus invoked the idea of film as art to request government support for festivals and screen education activities and to promote the idea of film culture among aspiring filmmakers. The film cultural field was a "cognitive praxis," by which I mean the activity of borrowing, elaborating, refining, modifying, testing out, disseminating, and otherwise putting into practice a framework of ideas.[4]

Art Cinema

The idea of art cinema was a constitutive assumption of the film culture field. Interpretation and evaluation were intimately connected, in the sense that evaluation gave the point to interpretation while interpretation was a condition of (informed) evaluation.[5] The task of interpreting a film was connected to the task of assessing its value as a work of art. Inspired by the *politique des auteurs*, film criticism often became a practice of canonization and dismissal. The *Monthly Magazine* of the College Cine Club, for instance, established a system whereby individual critics would rate films on a four-point system, while the *Chinese Student Weekly* elaborated annual ten-best lists that were in turn debated in the pages of daily newspapers. This was a highly self-conscious movement in the field of criticism whose aim was to establish a canon of great foreign and Chinese directors that demanded or deserved authorial interpretation, an approach that drew extensively on European and North American models, which were sometimes modified and criticized. The praxis of screen criticism was characterized by a tendency to reflect on the values and protocols of criticism itself. Film theory was, at least during its formative stages, a species of metacriticism. The principles of auteur theory and film art were consciously imported and debated in the *Chinese Student Weekly* and the College Cine Club's *Monthly Magazine*, which contained frequent references to art cinema auteurs like Federico Fellini or Michelangelo Antonioni and critics like Andrew Sarris or V. F. Perkins.

In many critical writings, the figure of the author as an expressive agent remained an important principle of interpretation. The ideal of the filmmaker as a creative personality depended on not only aesthetic but also ethical criteria. In addition to praising the formal and thematic inventiveness of individual auteurs, film critics also demanded personal courage, independence,

and integrity from local directors. In this sense, the category of the film auteur mirrored that of the film critic: Law Kar has retrospectively characterized the critical community that emerged in the 1960s as a group marked by great sincerity and independence.[6] The ideal of the art cinema author and that of the art cinema critic were conceived in homologous terms that combined aesthetic and ethical interests. One may speak of a general movement in the field of criticism whose aim was not simply to erect a canon of great foreign directors but also to establish the artistic values of Chinese directors by erecting a corpus of canonical filmmakers and film texts that in their view demanded or deserved authorial interpretation. A powerful example of this auteurist framework was the critical reception of the Hong Kong filmmaker Tang Shuxuan, whose films throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s displayed the kind of intelligence and independence admired by younger reviewers. Herself a former critic who worked to forge a film culture in Hong Kong inspired by art cinema paradigms, Tang exemplified a widely shared aspiration for an alternative film practice. Her critical review *Close Up* had upheld ideals of artistic independence and personal expression in the 1970s, and she made her films under a concept of cinema as art, employing self-conscious thematic, stylistic, and narrative innovations that critics then extracted and commented on.

Tang's corpus was the subject of two intelligent analyses by the critics Law Kar and Lau Shing-hon. The former concentrated exclusively on her first film, *The Arch [Dong Furen]* (1970), while the latter provided a more comprehensive evaluation of her overall career. To consider the rhetorical strategies and assumptions behind these two essays is to study how the idea of the author functioned as a source of identity and legitimacy for the emerging film culture field in Hong Kong. First of all, the two critics celebrated Tang's independence from commercial concerns. Law Kar described Tang Shuxuan as a "bold" director whose project did not take "commercial factors into consideration," thus mounting a "challenge" to the dominant practices of the industry: *The Arch* was "a revolution, in spirit if not in practice."[7] Lau constructed a similar image of the filmmaker as a pioneering fighter for the creation of a genuine film culture. While the Hong Kong cinema of the 1970s was dominated by martial arts films, Lau argued, Tang Shuxuan's "courageous" films explored political and existential questions.[8] Aesthetic criteria once again ramified into ethical ones: the artistic quality of the films was assumed to be inseparable from the personal courage and independence of their director.

Second, both essays extracted a set of consistent themes that pervaded the

director's work and testified to the seriousness of her art. The two interpretations were remarkably similar and implicitly or explicitly echoed the director's own statements: while Law Kar described Tang's first film as an illustration of "the existential proposition that people should be responsible for their own actions and decisions," Lau emphasized "the helplessness of the individual under pressure from the system" and the difficulty of making a meaningful and effective choice.[9] Both critics also noted the presence of Freudian sexual symbols and existentialist themes in Tang's work, thus establishing the filmmaker's importance by drawing on familiar elements of highbrow European literature.[10] At the same time, Law Kar also praised *The Arch* for incorporating "subtle metaphors and ambiguous juxtapositions of scenery and emotions" that combined "the spirit of classical Chinese painting and poetry with a modernism enlightened by contemporary philosophy."[11] Thus Tang's concerns intersected with an important preoccupation of such Hong Kong film theorists and filmmakers of this generation as Lin Niantong: the way that cinematic representation can keep faith with distinctly Chinese aesthetic traditions within a modernist framework influenced by international art cinema themes.

Third, the essays praised not only Tang's thematic contents but also her exploration of style and narrative form. In line with the interpretive protocols of art cinema explication, Law Kar argued that *The Arch* "breaks away from the traditional confines of dramatic action and plot, and centres on the psychological conflicts of the characters."[12] And although Lau found the self-conscious technique of *The Arch* excessive and distracting, he praised the more accomplished use of "surreal" images and sounds in her second film, *China Behind*, thus organizing her authorial career as a development from initial exploration to full artistic maturity. Every film was framed as a stage in the evolution of a creative personality.

Finally, both Law Kar and Lau Shing-hon organized their accounts partly in order to foreground and defend the contribution of art cinema institutions to the development of a Hong Kong film culture. Law explicitly noted that both the *Chinese Student Weekly* and the seminal Taiwan magazine *Influence* defended Tang's work against the pressures from the industry, thus working to create a heroic image of the critical community of which he remains a pivotal figure.[13] The figure of Tang Shuxuan furnished material for a reaffirmation of the film culture field in its independence from industrial pressures, thus affirming the kinship between the auteur and the critical community. Law's emphasis on the foresight of local critics also contributed to the institutional memory of the achievements of the film culture field. In

a similar vein, Lau Shing-hon appropriated Tang Shuxuan as an ancestor of the Hong Kong New Wave, using her films to valorize the efforts of a later generation of film culture workers. The history of Hong Kong cinema was thus retrospectively rewritten from the standpoint of the new directors: "If [Tang Shuxuan] had made her appearance ten years later, joining forces with the younger generation of filmmakers, her chances of making it commercially would have been much better. Her debut was made before her time."[14]

The general paradigm of auteur cinema interpretation mobilized by Law Kar and Lau Shing-hon offered the critical community important advantages: it furnished a fruitful interpretive approach that relied on the figure of the director as an organizing principle of textual meaning; it provided a set of moral and aesthetic norms, such as originality and independence, that underlay the daily business of reviewing films as well as the longer essays written for scholarly journals and film festival booklets; it fostered an awareness of film history by encouraging critics to identify individual filmmakers of previous generations as independent artists who anticipated the New Wave by departing from commercial expectations; and finally, art cinema's struggle against mere commerce helped to alert critics to the uneasy institutional relationship between film culture and capitalism. The critic Gu Er noted that "film-making in Hong Kong today is business first with films as the commodity," thus creating a situation wherein some filmmakers "are only interested in the box-office" while "others are more concerned with the quality of the films and feel more responsibility towards the audience."[15] This emphasis on "responsibility" shows how an ethical definition of authorship underpinned critical descriptions of Hong Kong's commercial industry.

Reflectionism

In defining its antagonistic, or at best ambivalent, relationship to commercial culture, critical discourses sometimes decried the lack of cultural cosmopolitanism among local filmmakers and the moviegoing public, whose overwhelming interest in commercial entertainment putatively precluded the rise of a genuine art cinema movement. The birth of the Hong Kong International Film Festival in 1977 has to be viewed, at least in part, against the twofold background of an image of the city as a cultural desert and a self-definition of critics as cultural connoisseurs with a pedagogic mission. Writing in 1981, Law Wai-ming asserted that the festival was "established primarily to afford the local audience the opportunity to acquaint itself with cultural developments overseas" and to compensate for the absence

of a "climate more conducive to the development of film culture" in Hong Kong.[16] Cultural cosmopolitanism often became a criterion measured against which local moviegoers were found wanting. Sek Kei similarly described Hong Kong as "an extremely commercialized and opportunistic city in which the cinema is regarded purely as an entertainment medium"; in his view, Hong Kong society "lacks a knack for analysis in depth."[17]

The central categories of art cinema (sincerity, independence, originality, and cultural leadership) were thus connected to an ambivalent image of the people of Hong Kong as cinema consumers. This image was constructed from the institutional standpoint of a critical community with an interest in the idea of art. The critics defined their own social mission by producing a description of the population of Hong Kong as indifferent to the idea of culture. In 1965, Liu Fang described the contribution of the *Chinese Student Weekly* film critics as a pedagogic practice of "enhancing the audience's standards of aesthetic appreciation" through continuing endeavors of film analysis and explication.[18] The "guidance" of viewers became an important project for the new critics, whose societal function required the presence of an implied audience in need of cultural leadership.

Members of the film culture field also addressed the relationship between the cinema and society, for several additional reasons. First of all, interpretation was sometimes regarded as a practice of contextualization. To grasp the meaning of a film seems to require a reconstruction of the cultural and social environment out of which that film emerged, or against which it reacted. Secondly, the organizational needs of the members of the critical community demanded a more thorough and realistic assessment of their societal environment. As early as 1965, Law Kar was urging fellow film writers to take note of the practical possibilities and constraints available in the Hong Kong environment before setting out to promote art cinema.[19] The practical goal of creating an institutional space for the production and appreciation of cinematic art gave point to the study of Hong Kong society.

The third reason for the Hong Kong critics' sociological bent was more overtly political: the ivory tower apoliticism of an art-for-art's-sake approach, it was sometimes felt, would banefully divert intellectuals from more urgent societal and political problems. The sense that the selective curriculum fostered by the colonial education system deprived Hong Kong of a genuine historical awareness of its own past, coupled with the growth of a distinct local identity in the 1960s and 1970s, supplied a cognitive background that encouraged Hong Kong cultural critics to demand a realist cinema. I propose the term "normative realism" to describe the conviction that filmmakers

ought to depict their social and historical reality. Law Kar, for instance, complained that the dominant cinema of the 1960s was made in the Mandarin dialect by exiled mainlanders detached from Hong Kong life.[20] Critical discourses often used normative realism to denounce the commercial cinema for failing to portray characters and situations that were explicitly *of* Hong Kong and to furnish insights about its society and history. Sek Kei, for instance, described the "social psychology" of the Hong Kong cinema as a practice of "collective hypnotism" based on "standard formulas" that "pander to a mass commercial market in an effort to entertain," indulging in "the artificial and make-believe" rather than producing a "realistic objective study" of society.[21] The point was not only that local filmmakers failed to convey historical information or to show and analyze important facts of economic and political life, but that they cultivated a general attitude of indifference to history. This understanding of Hong Kong commercial cinema pervaded a study by Leung Noong-kong that identified a putative "collective tendency" or "collective consciousness" among Hong Kong commercial filmmakers. Their work "neither aims to remind us of our specific past (i.e., the various historical factors), nor does it strive to present us with our specific present, not to mention inducing reflection on the city's future."[22]

The critics' sense of social responsibility stemmed from a sense of urgency regarding the recovery of the territory's forgotten history and promotion among the public of the capacity for sociological and political reflection on their own present situation. The task at hand was to analyze the relationship between film and society, with a critical interest in unmasking the ahistorical commercialism of Hong Kong cinema. The project of promoting art cinema ramified into a practice of cultural critique. Critics not only described the local cinema's putative evasion of history but also sought to explain it; and they (sometimes) did so by appealing to a reflectionist framework. Reflectionism is an interpretive approach that accounts for the presence of stylistic, narrative, and thematic devices by reference to societal processes, structures, and events. Some critics argued that Hong Kong cinema's putative flight from social reality was determined by the colonial administration and its dominant political culture. The stringent censorship regulations imposed by the government, Sek Kei observed, discourage local filmmakers from accurately depicting the territory's social conflicts, a situation rooted in the fact that the Hong Kong people are "not truly the masters of their city."[23] At the same time, the "provincial" traditionalism of the local cinema functioned "to offer a colonized people a link with their past" and to project an "anti-Western" sentiment.[24] Another widespread variation on this reflectionist

framework argued that all or most recent Hong Kong films were explicitly or implicitly about the 1997 reversion to Chinese rule.

Reflectionism is the other side of the coin of normative realism. Although these two categories do not logically entail one another, many scholars who uphold the one often also, and for similar reasons, uphold the other. It is easy to understand why: since the cinema is (presumably) always determined by society, any film that fails to illuminate its social context remains blind to its own process of construction. A nonrealistic film is a blind symptom of its own social determinants that fails to offer genuine insight into them. The assumption that the cinema reflects society places cultural producers under the obligation to portray that society as accurately and honestly as possible. Thus reflectionism sometimes gave point to normative realism.

The film historian Ng Ho, for instance, mobilized both normative realist and reflectionist paradigms in asserting that "Chinese History has died in Hong Kong Cinema."[25] He contended that the colony's films contained so many errors of historical fact as to symptomatically reveal a collective "historical amnesia." This lack of historical awareness presumably reflects two social realities. First of all, the colonial administration's education policy undermined the students' awareness of contemporary Chinese history, in line with dominant economic and political interests. Secondly, Ng Ho invoked Fredric Jameson's familiar theory of postmodernism to suggest that Hong Kong's flight into an imaginary, nostalgic past was fostered by the worldwide expansion of the commodity form. This application of the ideas in Jameson's essay is crude and uncritical; but it is in any case important not to overemphasize the influence of postmodern theory on Hong Kong critics. Jameson's symptomatic interpretation of postmodernity as the "cultural logic" of late capitalism was, I think, chosen because it provided something like a sophisticated reflectionist model. This theory obviously fit in well with the sociological orientation that the Hong Kong critical community had already developed prior to their acquaintance with postmodern theory. A Jamesonian approach could therefore be readily accommodated within a preexisting critical interest in reflectionism. At the same time, the incorporation of poststructural and neo-Marxian paradigms also functioned as markers of intellectual authority for the critics, as they addressed a growing scholarly readership with an avid interest in the latest theoretical trends of the West.

In addition to providing a sociological explanation for the local film industry's lack of historical awareness, the reflectionist framework also functioned to promote a perception of the cinema as a source of historical documentation about Hong Kong society. The Twelfth Hong Kong International

Film Festival marked a milestone in this vision of film history as "changes in Hong Kong society through cinema." The commercial cinema of Hong Kong was regarded as a mirror of its audience's mass psychology. Although this presupposition is not shared by every critic and scholar, Sek Kei looked to popular culture as a site where the ethos of the general population, the "social psychology" of Hong Kong, finds its clearest expression, where the discourses of the film culture field have been at the forefront of a growing scholarly interest in redeeming Hong Kong history. Theoretical interest in writing a local history was entwined with a practical interest in showing and preserving local films. Introducing the aims of that year's festival, its coordinator, Li Cheuk-to, forcefully underscored the "contributions of our filmmakers towards our local culture and history" and asserted that "without a local history, there is no local culture."[26] I would use the term "disappearing history thesis" to denote what Sek Kei has described as "the common perception that a vital part of [Hong Kong's historical] legacy may vanish."[27]

New Wave

The development of the film culture field as an institutional, ethical, and aesthetic system during the 1960s and 1970s paved the way for the emergence of the category of the Hong Kong New Wave in several ways. The institutions of the field furnished a domain where aspiring filmmakers and critics conversed with one another, directly or through the mediation of the printed word. The idea of film culture included an aspiration to create a fruitful dialogue between theory and practice, such that theoretical insight could guide and inform creative efforts. Filmmakers such as Allen Fong, Tsui Hark, Patrick Tam, and John Woo had participated in the cine club movement, sometimes collaborated with critical publications, invoked art-cinema conventions in their films, and were ready to dialogue with the critical community.

Members of this critical community often described the New Wave by drawing on a range of concepts or tropes developed in the film culture field. The first trope was an ethical conception of authorship. In a 1979 *Film Biweekly* editorial, for instance, Law Wai-ming described the figure of the "new Hong Kong director" in terms of an ideal of the personality that combined aesthetics and ethics. In line with protocols of art cinema interpretation, the new directors were partly characterized and differentiated from previous generations, and from the mainstream industry as a whole, by reference to ethical criteria: they were not only "intellectually capable of

expressing themselves in a serious artistic way," but also worked to "keep their integrity and ethical sense, and their individuality." New directors presumably asserted their individuality by seeking out new themes, new narrative methods, and a new mise-en-scène. Thus Law Wai-ming defined the new cinema in terms of a struggle between the individual and the collective: "originality is a matter of personal experience" and courage, a definition in conflict with the "basic principle of commercial cinema," which "subordinates individuality to popular taste."[28]

Second, critical descriptions of the New Wave retained the ambivalent image of the commercial film industry as the other of the film culture field. Leung Noong-kong, for instance, argued in 1979 that the Hong Kong film industry reproduces "proven formulas with as little variation as possible."[29] The notion of a "static" commercial cinema provided a rhetorical strategy for highlighting the difference between the new generation and the dominant cinema. At the same time, many critics assumed that it was not practically feasible for young filmmakers to break away completely from "commercialism." The main task of the new directors, then, was to employ existing commercial genres while adapting them to their individual concerns in accordance with the criteria of originality and seriousness. The presupposition that the ideal auteur kept faith with the aspiration of the film culture field even within the constraints of a commercial film industry not only provided a yardstick for critical evaluation and analysis, but also determined the aspirations and self-justifications of some filmmakers. Patrick Tam's debut film *The Sword [Ming Jian]* (1980), for instance, transformed the generic conventions of the *wuxia pian* (swordplay film) by reframing the epic figure of the heroic swordsman as a passive or self-destructive character. This interest in generic variation was also informed by the work of European auteurs like Roman Polanski (*Dance of the Vampires, Chinatown*) who had self-consciously transformed existing commercial genres. Tsui Hark described the making of his own debut film *The Butterfly Murders [Die Bian]* (1979) as a solution to the aesthetic problem of how to depart "from the orthodox martial arts world as expounded in the novels of Ku Lung and Chin Yung" in order to "strike a new path."[30] He achieved this aim by introducing anachronistic elements from other genres, including science fiction, the detective thriller, and the James Bond–type spy film.

A third trope highlighted the filmmakers' unprecedentedly cosmopolitan (international or modern) orientation. Critics and directors often appealed to exemplary models from European or North American film or theory in reviews, interviews, and allusions in individual films. Ann Hui has troped Alain Resnais in *Starry Is the Night [Jinye Xingguang Canlan]* (1988) and Roman

Polanski in *The Spooky Bunch [Zhuang Dao Zheng]* (1980). This international outlook did not preclude an interest in locating distinctly Chinese aesthetic forms. Noel Burch's *To the Distant Observer*, for instance, influenced Patrick Tam's search for a specifically Chinese or "Oriental" cinematic language in his early work. A related critical discourse on the New Wave, sometimes underpinned by Marxist theory, urged directors to step back from and reflect on their cultural and political presuppositions so as to attain greater clarity about the social implications of their work. The rhetoric of cosmopolitanism incorporated a demand for self-reflexivity. In an important 1981 *Film Biweekly* essay titled "Notes on the New Cinema," Evans Chan criticized Allen Fong's *Father and Son [Fuzi Qing]* (1981) for failing to take a reflective distance from its own bourgeois and patriarchal assumptions.[31] Chan's point was that the director's implicit, although well-intentioned, traditionalism led to a sentimental nostalgia that detracted from the film's emotional expressiveness and aesthetic power. The implication was, of course, that New Wave directors have a duty to stand back from taken-for-granted presuppositions and thematize their own ideological and cultural horizons.

Fourth, normative realism provided a criterion by which to demarcate the new Hong Kong cinema from the old. Sek Kei praised New Wave films for incorporating urban settings and exploring historical and social changes, thus producing "a sense of belonging to Hong Kong itself."[32] Wider social factors, particularly changes in government censorship and the future transition to Chinese sovereignty, presumably encouraged directors like Ann Hui to capture a "local Hong Kong flavor." This historical consciousness became a central criterion of membership in the New Wave. Speaking with hindsight, Evans Chan recently observed that Ann Hui's *The Secret [Feng Jie]* (1979) "showed my generation that Hong Kong had a past, even a haunted past" and therefore marked an important stage in the process of constituting an evolving Hong Kong identity: the film, together with the work of Allen Fong and others, "recognized the validity" of a distinctly Hong Kong experience.[33]

According to the standard description, then, the New Wave combined a cosmopolitan understanding of film form influenced by world cinema models with a realist commitment to the specificity of a local identity. This standpoint, of course, mirrored the similarly twofold self-understanding of film critics as cultural connoisseurs of world culture and redeemers of Hong Kong history. New Wave directors have sometimes also explicitly framed their own work as a record of local history. Thus *Father and Son*, which its director described as the "autobiography" of his own generation, contained references to the Shep Kip Mei fire of 1953.[34] Art cinema criteria

Figure 1. Hong Kong had a haunted past in *The Secret* (Ann Hui, 1979).

of verisimilitude and sincerity frequently undergird Allen Fong's interest in depicting a history that has been suppressed from commercial cinema, and in celebrating those everyday activities and experiences that have been treated as nonevents by the commercial film industry. The director has himself evoked the vanishing history trope through the voice of a fictional character: a drama teacher and aspiring filmmaker in his *Ah Ying [Banbian Ren]* (1982) asserts that he wants "to make a film that reflects our time. Otherwise, nobody will ever know that we existed." This historical intent underlies Fong's use of actual locations and nonprofessional actors to depict a local history on the verge of disappearance. While this prevalent concern with history echoed critical efforts to define and capture a "Hong Kong experience," the work of self-conscious directors such as Allen Fong or Ann Hui in turn helped to encourage critics of this generation to continue analyzing and collecting their local history.

Periodization and Nostalgia

For a critical community to describe a film as an example of the new cinema, or to name a filmmaker as a new director, was to confer on the film the status of a candidate for aesthetic appreciation, or to ordain its maker a serious artist, and to encourage further work in the same direction. The critic's role also contained the self-proclaimed authority to deny or withdraw status,

which has been exercised as frequently as that of bestowing it. The most dramatic way of denying status or withdrawing a commendation was to argue that the Hong Kong New Wave never existed. In June 1981, *Film Biweekly* published a round-table discussion between the young critics Roger Garcia, Jerry Liu, and Li Cheuk-to. Its surprising title, "Re-Evaluating the New Cinema," suggests that the nature of the Hong Kong New Wave, its very existence as a movement, had already become problematic less than two years after its inception. In one of the more extreme formulations, Garcia asserted that "perhaps there is no such a thing as a Hong Kong New Wave."[35] Critics sometimes used the very ideal of artistic originality, which had initially helped to define the New Wave, against those selfsame new directors by stressing their failure to break away from the traditions of Hong Kong commercialism.

The initial expectations aroused by the work of the New Wave have often given way to widespread disappointment with its eventual evolution. In 1991, Sek Kei symptomatically wrote that the New Wave had "not gone deep enough into arts, politics, and society" and had thus fallen into a trap of "superficiality and confusion."[36] Some critics chose to blame the filmmakers themselves, or the putative commercial orientation of Hong Kong audiences, or the lack of public funding, but the consensus had nonetheless been reached that the moment of the New Wave, if it ever existed, had in any case come to an end. These discourses project a sense that the relative autonomy of film scholarship and criticism from market pressures did not correspond to the creation of a similarly autonomous context of film production and dissemination, creating a mismatch between the demands of a critical community with an interest in art and the economic constraints of filmmaking institutions. The tension between art and commerce has remained a central trope of Hong Kong film criticism. In retrospect, the movement's pioneering years, variously understood to comprise the television apprenticeship of the mid-1970s or the early cinema work around 1979, sometimes became an object of nostalgia and idealization, a romantic "golden age" of local cinema when critics and filmmakers came together as a community, a film culture field, whose shared aspirations and potentials have yet to be fulfilled.

Notes

This essay could not have been written without the generosity of Evans Chan, Law Kar, and Linda Chiu-han Lai.

1 Law Wai-ming, "Tre editoriali sul 'Nuovo Cinema,'" in *Cinemasia*, ed. Marco Müller (Pesaro: Mostra Internazionale del Nuovo Cinema/Marsilio Editori,

1983), 154. Originally published as "Bainjishi Baogao," *Dianying Shuangzhoukan [Film Biweekly]* 20 (October 1979): ii.

2 For some reminiscences of the period, see *Fifty Years of Electric Shadows: Report of Conference on Hong Kong Cinema* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1997), 65–68.

3 Ibid., 66. Law Kar, "Luo Ga Huishouhua Dianying" ["Law Kar Looks Back on the Cinema"], *Boyi Yuekan* 14 (15 October 1988): 133.

4 Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Social Movements: A Cognitive Approach* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

5 Cf. David Bordwell, *Making Meaning* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 43–52.

6 Law Kar, "Luo Ga Huishouhua Dianying," 133.

7 Law Kar, "The Significance of *The Arch*," in *A Comparative Study of Post-War Mandarin and Cantonese Cinema: The Films of Zhu Shilin, Qin Jian, and Other Directors* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1983), 163.

8 Lau Shing-hon, "Su Shuen: The Lone-Rider in Hong Kong Cinema in the 1970s," in *A Study of Hong Kong Cinema in the Seventies* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1984), 109.

9 Lau, 108; Law Kar, "The Significance of *The Arch*," 165.

10 Lau, 106; Law Kar, "The Significance of *The Arch*," 166.

11 Law Kar, "The Significance of *The Arch*," 164.

12 Ibid., 164.

13 Ibid., 163.

14 Lau, 106.

15 Gu Er, "Li Chenfeng," in *Cantonese Cinema Retrospective (1950–1959)* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1971), 71.

16 Law Wai-ming, *The Fifth International Hong Kong Film Festival* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1981), 4.

17 Sek Kei, "Achievement and Crisis: Hongkong Cinema in the 80s," in *Hong Kong Cinema in the Eighties* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1991), 58.

18 Liu Fang, "Dianying Piping de Lichang Wenti" ["The Problem of Standpoint in Film Criticism"], *Xinsheng Wanbao [New Live Evening News]*, 7 May 1965.

19 Law Kar, "Dui Xian Jieduan Xianggang Yingping de Jidian Yijian" ["A Few Points on the Present Style of Film Criticism in Hong Kong"], *Xinsheng Wanbao*, 7 May 1965.

20 Law Kar, "Luo Ga Huishouhua Dianying," 133.

21 Sek Kei, "The Social Psychology of Hongkong Cinema," in *Changes in Hong Kong Society through Cinema* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1988), 15.

22 Leung Noong-kong, "Notes on the Hong Kong Cinema," in *The Hong Kong Contemporary Cinema* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1982), 13.

23 Sek, "The Social Psychology of Hongkong Cinema," 19.

24 Sek Kei, "The Extraordinary History of the Cantonese Cinema," *Cantonese Cinema Retrospective (1950–1959)* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1971), 36.

25 Ng Ho, "Imbecility of History in Hong Kong Cinema," in *A Perspective of Chinese Cinemas of the 90's* (Taipei: Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival, 1994), 70.

26 Li Cheuk-to, introduction to *Changes in Hong Kong Society through Cinema* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1988), 9.

27 Sek, "Achievement and Crisis: Hongkong Cinema in the 80s," 53.
28 Law Wai-ming, "Tre editoriali sul 'Nuovo Cinema,'" 155.
29 Leung Noong-kong, "Towards a New Wave in the Hong Kong Cinema," in *Hong Kong Cinema '79* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1979). Roger Garcia argued in a similar vein that the commercial structure of Hong Kong film production encourages a reliance on "rigid" conventions and codes and theatrical emphasis on dramatic content over form. Roger Garcia, "The Static Image," in *The Hong Kong Contemporary Cinema* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1982), 6.
30 *The Fourth International Film Festival* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1980), 173.
31 Evans Chan, "Bununian—'Xin Dianying' Biji" ["Notes on the New Cinema"], in *Xianggang Dianying Fengmao [The Style and Features of Hong Kong Cinema]*, ed. Peggy Chiao (Taibei: Shibao Chuban, 1987), 47.
32 Sek, "Achievement and Crisis: Hongkong Cinema in the 80s," 53.
33 Personal conversation with the author, 1998.
34 Olivier Assayas, "Du bon usage de la télévision: Entretien avec Allen Fong," *Cahiers du cinéma* 360–361 (September 1984): 109.
35 Li, "Chongxin Jiantian 'Xin Dianying,'" 368.
36 Sek, "Achievement and Crisis: Hongkong Cinema in the 80s," 58.