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realtime 85 June-July 2008

last man standing

mike walsh on new films by hong kong's johnnie to

Mike Walsh

THE HONG KONG FILM INDUSTRY, LIKE THE CITY ITSELF, CHANGES CONVULSIVELY. GONE ARE THE DAYS OF A VIBRANT COMMERCIAL INDUSTRY BASED ON EXUBERANT GENRE FILMS. IF THE LOCAL PANORAMA SECTION AT THE RECENT HONG KONG INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL IS ANYTHING TO GO BY, THE POSSIBILITIES HAVE POLARISED INTO BIG BUDGET HACK-AND-SLASH HISTORICAL EPICS CO-PRODUCED ON THE MAINLAND OR SMALL CITY-SPECIFIC YOUTH FILMS MADE CHEAPLY BY FILM SCHOOL GRADUATES.

It seems that the last man standing in the commercial cinema is Johnnie To Kei-fung. He had three films screening in and around this year's festival and, at the time of writing, several attempts are underway to bring these films (and the man himself) to Australian cinemas. To is a prolific figure, having directed over 50 films in the past 25 years and producing many others through his company Milky Way Image. He has won numerous awards with films such as *The Mission*, *Running Out of Time*, the two recent *Election* films and *Exiled*.

After years of moving between styles in order to gain international recognition as an auteur, To seems to have found a mature vision with his recent films, *The Mad Detective* and *Sparrow*. He is an unashamedly commercial director working in crime stories and occasionally comedies, but one who wants to push genre filmmaking to the limits of abstraction. It is no accident that his films have become staples at the Cannes, Berlin and Venice film festivals over the past couple of years.

The Mad Detective marks To's reconciliation with scenarist Wai Ka-fai with whom he collaborated on the equally bizarre *Running on Karma* in 2003. Wai has an established thematic interest in visionary protagonists who are powerless to change their destiny. Long-time To star Lau Ching-wan plays Bun, a cop whose curse is his ability to see people who aren't there.

The self is an essentially porous construction in this film. By placing himself in the physical position of others, Bun can identify himself completely with them and thereby recreate crimes. Hence, his unorthodox methods of detection include being zipped into a large carry bag and thrown downstairs. He also looks within people and sees the deeply divided components of their psyches, including a killer with seven different personalities. As one who is ever more conscious of the fat, middle-aged accountant and the Japanese schoolgirl simultaneously struggling for ascendancy inside him, it's difficult not to take the detective's madness seriously.

The film involves the continual adjustment and refinement of its abstract premises for the audience. There is no early overarching explanation of the detective's powers or his hallucinatory plight. Each scene plays out like the solution to a piece of puzzle which, in turn, sets up a further puzzle. Our understanding of the narrative situation unfolds incrementally. In one scene, Bun intervenes to stop a young girl shoplifting and then argues with his wife who protests his interference. It turns out that his wife is upset because the girl wasn't really there. It's only some time later, however, that we realise that the wife wasn't there either.

While this sounds rather cryptic, the film was a commercial success in Hong Kong because it rewards the audience for figuring out the puzzle as the film progresses. It's a film which makes you feel smarter at the end than when you went into the cinema.

Sparrow, which premiered at the Berlin Film Festival earlier this year, is a long-term To project, shot over three years between other projects. It is much lighter in tone than most of To's recent crime films, dealing with a group of small-time pickpockets who are recruited by a mysterious temptress to win her freedom from a threatening sugar daddy.

The story proceeds through a series of set pieces in which the object is to imply everything while

telling the audience as little as possible. The film shimmers along with a minimum of dialogue. The female protagonist's sexual allure is established in the way she takes a cigarette from the mouth of one of the heroes, takes a drag leaving lipstick on it, and then wordlessly returns it to his lips.

Glorious spatial play abounds unencumbered by dialogue. The gang pursues the woman into a tiny elevator, only to find they are jammed into the space with two workmen carrying a huge fish tank. All the threat and the tension in the scene has to be spoken with looks, just as the space has to be broken up and reassembled through montage.

This push towards a purely formal organisation of narrative finds its crescendo in the final encounter featuring black umbrellas, driving rain and the swirling abstraction of figures pirouetting in the dark. It is one of the most deliciously choreographed and cut sequences in contemporary cinema.

The lightness of tone comes from the way To foregrounds the aspect of play in genre narrative, and so it comes as no surprise that he organised Triangle, the third of his films shown at the Hong Kong festival. The challenge here was that Tsui Hark should script and direct the first third of a film, deliver it to Ringo Lam who would make the middle, and then pass it on To who would provide the end. In the spirit of Lars von Trier's The Five Obstructions, Triangle explores the idea that art-making is a playful process in which you constantly set yourself challenges which you then try to overcome.

The story echoes or allegorises the challenge of this collaboration as three buddies try to pull off a heist, while trying not to betray each other in the process. The result is surprisingly coherent despite Tsui's characteristic disregard for narrative clarity, and the marriage of To's more elegant and elegiac sensibility with the smash and grab cynicism of his colleagues. Where Lam has the treacherous female character apparently fatally wounded, To miraculously (and gracefully) resurrects her and reconciles her with her husband. The discontinuity works as a kind of wink to the audience, highlighting and celebrating the arbitrary nature of the game of artistic form.

Johnnie To Kei-fung, The Mad Detective, Sparrow, Triangle [with directors Tsui Hark and Ringo Lam], 32nd Hong Kong International Film Festival, March 17-April 6, www.hkiff.org.hk/eng/

RealTime issue #85 June-July 2008 pg. 19

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