



# **PLANET HONG KONG**

**POPULAR CINEMA AND THE ART OF ENTERTAINMENT**

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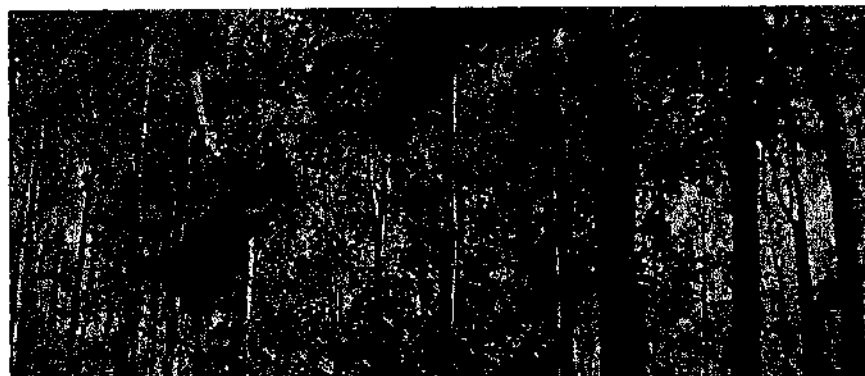
## ALL TOO EXTRAVAGANT, TOO GRATUITOUSLY WILD

Hong Kong cinema is one of the success stories of film history. For about twenty years, this city-state of around six million people had one of the most robust cinema industries in the world. In number of films released, it regularly surpassed nearly all Western countries. In export it was second only to the United States. It ruled the East Asian market, eventually obliterating one neighboring country's film industry. Distributed in the West, Hong Kong films became a cult phenomenon on an unprecedented scale. Although a typical production cost about as much as a German or French one, the industry enjoyed no subsidies of the sort that keep European cinema alive. Hong Kong movies were made simply because millions of people wanted to watch them.

Over the last two decades American film has devoured the world market. In some countries Hollywood claims 90 percent of box office receipts. Yet over the same years Hollywood movies held a minority position in Hong Kong, with U.S. market share sometimes falling to less than 30 percent. Global blockbusters often failed in Hong Kong. *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) ranked only sixteenth in local admissions, beaten by *The Dead and the Deadly*, *Legendary Weapons of China*, and *Boat People*. *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1989) earned just one-third the grosses of *God of Gamblers*. Not until the fateful year 1997 did Hollywood edge out the local product, claiming slightly over half the admission receipts—and some would blame that outcome on local underproduction and elevated ticket prices for Western fare.

How did this tiny cinema come to be so successful? Some answers lie in history and culture, but many others are to be found in the films themselves. Hong Kong's film industry offered something audiences desired. Year in and year out it produced dozens of fresh, lively, and thrilling movies. Since the 1970s it has been arguably the world's most energetic, imaginative popular cinema.

Every fan has favorite examples; here are two of mine. At the climax of the first part of King Hu's *A Touch of Zen* (1971), a swordsman and swords-



1.1 Swordfighters clash in midair in *A Touch of Zen*.

woman confront enemy warriors in a bamboo grove. It is no ordinary combat. The fighters leap twenty feet in the air, pivoting and somersaulting, sometimes clashing with one another (Fig. 1.1). The woman strategically vaults up, caroms off one tree trunk, and alights on another, clinging there like a spider before swiveling and dive-bombing her prey. Apart from the aerobatics, the swordfight is filmed and cut in a daringly opaque way. Although each image is carefully composed, the editing makes the shots so brief that we merely glimpse the fighters' extraordinary feats. Eisenstein and Kurosawa might admire the precise force of this sequence.

In Tsui Hark's *Peking Opera Blues* (1986), a young woman has allowed several friends to sleep overnight in her room, but in the morning her father bustles in unexpectedly. The friends must hide anywhere they can—crouching under the blanket, scampering around behind the father's back, even clambering up to the rafters (Fig. 1.2). Each shot's dodges are choreographed in layers for maximal comic effect (Figs. 1.3–1.5). As in *A Touch of Zen*, an outlandish premise is subjected to a rousing exactitude of execution.

Hong Kong films can be sentimental, joyous, rip-roaring, silly, bloody, and bizarre. Their audacity, their slickness, and their unabashed appeal to emotion have won them audiences throughout the world. "It is all too extravagant, too gratuitously wild," a *New York Times* reviewer complained of an early kung-fu import; now the charge looks like a badge of honor.<sup>1</sup> These outrageous entertainments harbor remarkable inventiveness and careful craftsmanship. They are Hong Kong's most important contribution to global culture. The best of them are not only crowd-pleasing but also richly and delightfully artful.

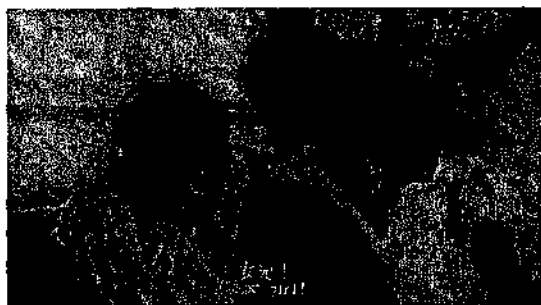
How can mass-produced movies be artful? To answer this question, we must be willing to grant that the compromises of business do not prevent mass entertainment from achieving genuine artistry. We must also grant that there is a distinct aesthetic of popular film—a set of principles that shape its forms and effects. Finally, we must be willing to look closely at



1.2 *Peking Opera Blues*: Bedroom farce becomes silent slapstick.



1.3 *Peking Opera Blues*: A hanging basket is knocked away ...



1.4 ... and accidentally swings out at the viewer ...

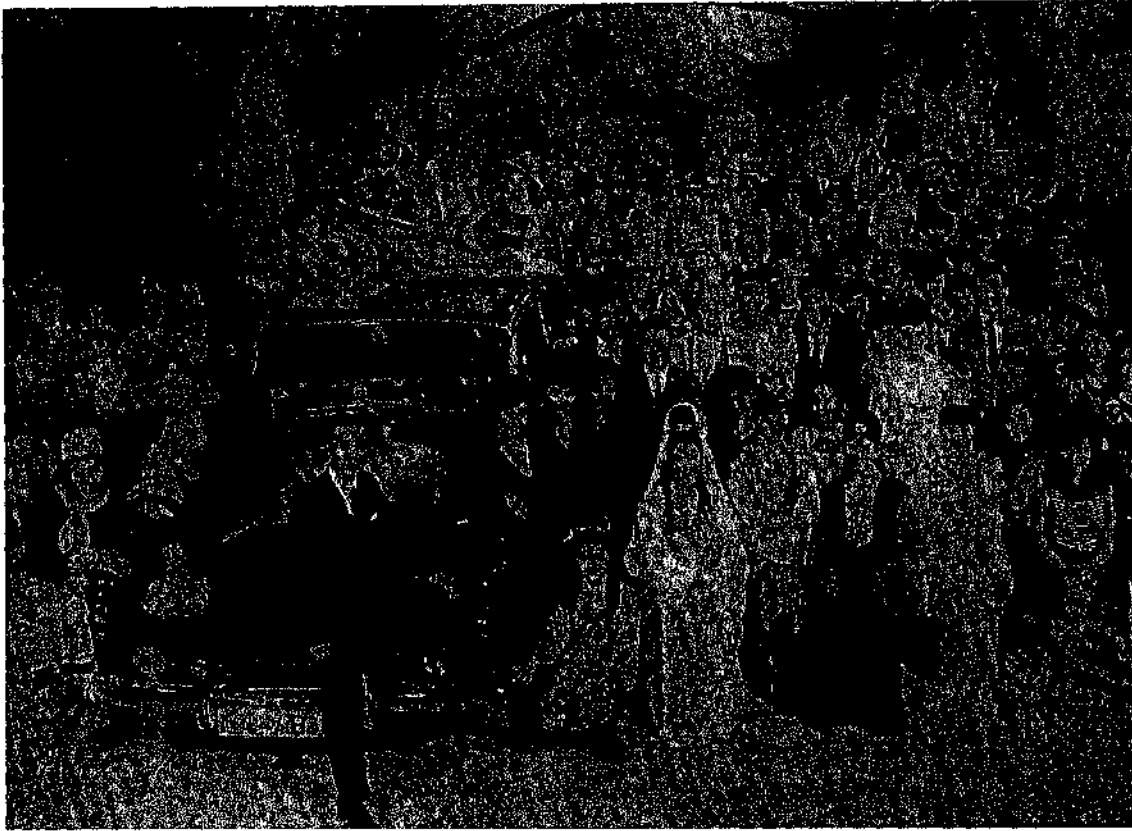


1.5 ... but is caught on the return by a boy who pops into view.

popular movies, to study how they tell their stories and deploy film technique; we must be ready to analyze.

Hong Kong cinema has been an industry for more than sixty years. During the war-torn 1930s and 1940s Shanghai film companies fled to the relative tranquillity of the British colony. Soon after the triumph of Mao's 1949 revolution, Hong Kong began turning out scores of movies in well-tried genres: comedies, crime movies, family dramas, swordfight films, and Chinese operas. Films were made in both Mandarin and Cantonese. The highest output came from large companies, most notably that of the Shaw brothers, who ran their "Movietown" like an old-fashioned Hollywood studio (Fig. 1.6).

Until the 1970s, Hong Kong movies found distribution only in Asia and in émigré communities. Most westerners learned of this cinema through the kung-fu film, with its revenge-driven plots and flamboyant martial arts. The worldwide success of Bruce Lee's films guaranteed that Hong Kong would be forever identified with this genre. But the world market became glutted with kung-fu films, and locally other trends emerged, such as the Cantonese dialect comedy identified with Michael Hui, a former TV star. Soon afterward Jackie Chan cultivated comic kung-fu and became the biggest star in Asia.



1.6 Run Run Shaw with some of his 1960s stars.

By the early 1980s virtually all Hong Kong films were in Cantonese, and a new generation of directors came to the fore. Often trained in the West and in television, less tied to Mainland traditions than older hands, these young filmmakers turned away from the martial arts and toward gangster films, sword-and-sorcery fantasy, and dramas of contemporary life. Many of the films garnered acclaim in festivals and foreign exhibition, the most notable success being Ann Hui's *Boat People* (1982). Although this "new wave" did not overturn the mass-production ethos of the industry (most of the young directors wound up in the mainstream), its energy reshaped Hong Kong cinema into a modern and distinctive part of the territory's mass culture.

Just as Margaret Thatcher's government prepared to cede the colony back to China, the Hong Kong film industry was launched upon what many regard as its golden decade. A flood of lively films raised production standards while expanding the possibilities of established genres. The hugely successful *Aces Go Places* series, launched in 1982, streamlined Cantonese comedy in farcical pastiches of James Bond intrigue. Jackie Chan modernized the kung-fu film by recasting it as adventure saga (*Pro-*

ject A, 1983) and urban police thriller (*Police Story*, 1985). In films like *Shanghai Blues* (1984), Tsui Hark updated older formulas through bold style and tongue-in-cheek humor. He also revived the historical kung-fu movie with his nationalistic epic *Once upon a Time in China* (1991). The gangster film returned with a hyperbolic romanticism in the "heroes" films of John Woo (*A Better Tomorrow*, 1986; *The Killer*, 1989), as well as in movies by Kirk Wong (*Gun Men*, 1988) and Ringo Lam (*Full Contact*, 1992). In the early 1990s the resurgent Hong Kong cinema finally came to public notice in the West. Jackie Chan and John Woo became American celebrities, and Tsui, Lam, Wong, and others finished films in Hollywood. Ironically, as local films gained respect, the industry went into a tailspin, losing its regional markets and falling prey to video piracy and the Asian financial crisis. Yet even as journalists were writing *finis* to this cinema, remarkable films continued to be made, and a new generation maintained Hong Kong's lively traditions.

How did such a frankly commercial filmmaking tradition manage to create the conditions for something we might recognize as artistry? Posing the question this way presumes that art suffers when it is bound up by commerce, yet many of the fine-art traditions we honor sprang from the market. Italian Renaissance painting was an intensely economic enterprise, responding to demands for portraits, frescoes, altarpieces, and decorated furniture. Artists were artisans, like the shoemaker, organizing their shops for efficiency and maximum profitability. Today, sculpture, painting, and orchestral music, along with virtually all architectural projects, result from commissions, in which market forces reveal themselves nakedly.

But in high art, some might argue, economic demand doesn't shape the specific outcome: whereas the elite artist expresses a singular vision, the popular artist must compromise in order to satisfy the audience. Yet this claim is an exaggeration. The Renaissance painter often had to fulfill a program laid down in the commission, which often specified subject, composition, materials, coloring, and iconography. In the nineteenth century the collapse of academic painting led to the rise of genre painting and the impressionist style, both shaped to the tastes of new customers, while composers were urged to court a comparatively untutored public by writing program music and overtly nationalistic pieces.

We need not go quite so far as Virgil Thomson, who once suggested that a composer's musical style changes in accord with the funding source.<sup>2</sup> It is just that in any art, form tends to follow format, and format is often shaped by business pressures. After Beethoven, composers increased the size and varied the instrumentation of the orchestra, partly in order to mount a massive sound that would fill the new, bigger auditoria built for general audiences. In eighteenth-century England, as writers lost their patrons, they came to depend upon booksellers, who demanded long pieces of prose fic-

tion. Commercial demands mold styles and forms, in both elite art and popular art. That a work of art is financed and marketed does not make it any less a work of art.

In popular cinema, highly personal films may be produced for an entertainment industry—witness those of Buster Keaton, Alfred Hitchcock, John Ford, Howard Hawks, and other distinctive filmmakers. But “art films” are a business as well. Granted, many are not the products of profit-driven local industries or entrepreneurs; they receive public funding. (In the late 1990s, the average European film was 70 percent state-financed.) Few of these subsidized films attract a local audience or overseas distribution, so as purely economic investments they are disastrous.<sup>3</sup> Instead pay-back shifts to another level. The subsidized film competes to win places in the world’s four hundred annual film festivals, which are hungry for non-mainstream fare of all kinds.<sup>4</sup> If a festival entry wins acclaim, perhaps an award, the sponsoring agency is confirmed in its decision to back the project, with honor flowing to national culture. For such reasons, the festival network has become a circuit of production, distribution, and exhibition parallel to that of mass-market cinema. Art cinema is not always profit-driven, but it remains market-oriented, and this pressure has affected its traditions, genres, and conventions.<sup>5</sup>

Hong Kong has a few “art films” that feed into festivals. Wong Kar-wai’s *Chungking Express* (1994) became a cult hit, and his *Happy Together* (1997) won the Best Director prize at Cannes. Until very recently, though, local moviemaking has been unsubsidized, so internationally prestigious directors like Clara Law, Ann Hui, and Stanley Kwan depend upon mainstream styles, stars, and genres. In comparison to their contemporaries—say, the austere Taiwanese directors Hou Hsiao-Hsien and Edward Yang—Hong Kong’s “festival” filmmakers look decidedly pop.

Popular cinema begins in business—the impulse to turn out pictures regularly to satisfy a mass audience’s appetite. What, then, would an aesthetic of popular film look like? Unsurprisingly, it is founded on mass tastes, and these often favor force over finesse. A mass-market movie from any culture tends to highlight pratfalls, spills, bodily functions, ladder accidents, and other base constants of human life. Since the 1930s Hollywood has been constrained by some lower-middle-class canons of taste, so we often forget how the silent clowns (even Chaplin’s romanticized Little Tramp) dwell on the ugly tactility of motor oil on spats, pie dripping from eyelashes, thumb-tacks fished out of the soup. Abbott and Costello, Jerry Lewis, Rodney Dangerfield, John Belushi, and Jim Carrey have maintained this tradition.

The vulgarity of popular cinema reaches paroxysmic extremes in Hong Kong. Here a typical movie will feature spitting, vomiting, nose-picking, and vistas of toilets and people’s mouths. In *Fight Back to School* (1991) Stephen Chiau pretends a condom is chewing gum and blows a bubble with it. In the farce *All’s Well End’s Well* (1992), offscreen a masseuse

whacks a man's feet with a baseball bat while a school official squats on a toilet; as the bat cracks, the official groans with bowel strain. Later in a hospital the film's amnesiac protagonist begins his day by gargling with the urine from his bedpan. Gags like these indicate that the spectacle of kung-fu is only one side of a cinema thoroughly fascinated with bodies *in extremis*. Hong Kong film celebrates voluptuousness and grotesquerie; it savors cleavage and penises, comic warts and farts, mold-blotched vampires, greedy eaters smeared with sauce and fat, and creatures with gigantic tongues. Nothing gorgeous or hideous is alien to this cinema.

Vulgarity offers one kind of forcefulness; striking images yield another. Hong Kong director Ringo Lam speaks for many of his peers: "I like visuals and simple stories. I would prefer my movies to have very little dialogue."<sup>6</sup> When Robert Parrish asked how he could learn to direct actors, John Ford suggested he watch *Stagecoach*. Parrish returned from the screening protesting that John Wayne had scarcely a dozen lines. "That's the way to direct actors," Ford replied. "Don't let 'em talk." Intellectuals often quote lame dialogue to show the callowness of popular cinema, but they thereby miss what lies in the images. It's hard to find weighty significance in the bedroom feints of *Peking Opera Blues* and the aerobatics of *A Touch of Zen*. In many movies, the chief pleasures are pictorial.

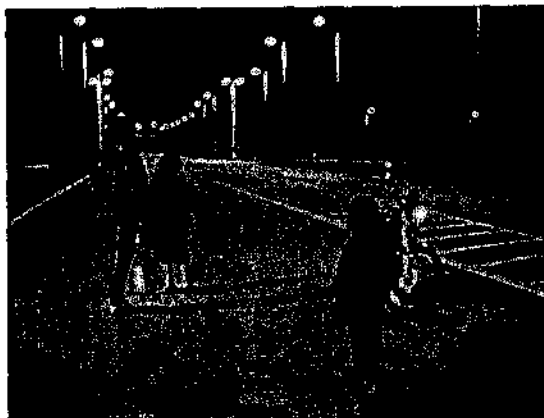
Which is to say that popular filmmakers have refined techniques of vivid visual storytelling. The foundations of "film language" were laid by the entertainment cinema of the 1900s and 1910s, when directors had to get stories across fast and vividly. D. W. Griffith, Victor Sjöström, and Louis Feuillade, the three finest directors of the period before 1918, were all churning out films for mass audiences. Today's popular cinema preserves many devices from the medium's earliest years—the chase, the hair-breadth escape, the cliff-hanging hero, the struggle with storms or gravity or locomotives. Hong Kong cinema, in its drive for clarity and impact, has revitalized silent-film techniques. Slow- and fast-motion, dynamic editing, striking camera angles, and other devices that the avant-garde of the 1920s declared to be "purely cinematic" are stock in trade in this popular cinema. Its makers have intuitively rediscovered the short, sharp flashback that serves to remind the audience of an earlier scene, as well as the "symbolic insert" beloved of early filmic storytelling (Fig. 1.7).

But doesn't all cinema exploit the power of moving images? Again we come to the trade-off between fastidiousness and force. Since the late 1950s, much Western art cinema has dwelt on static compositions and ambivalent moods (Fig. 1.8). Antonioni, Tarkovsky, Fassbinder, Wenders, and other outstanding directors have created a cinema of suggestive atmosphere.<sup>7</sup> The mass-entertainment filmmaker, committed to storytelling, anxious to rivet the audience's attention, strives for clear and dynamic images rather than contemplative ones. Style will tend toward functional economy. It favors the graceful behavior of performers, such as John





1.7 *The Killer*: Jenny's memory of John, treated as an emblematic image of his trade.



1.8 A moment in the odyssey of two children in Theo Angelopoulos' *Landscape in the Mist* (1988).

Wayne's strides and pauses at the rocky stream at the close of *The Quiet Man* (1952) or Bruce Lee's soaring kicks in *Fist of Fury* (1971). Filmmakers will take pride in the subtle precision of certain camera movements, or in editing tactics that convey stupendous agility.

A few filmmakers will prolong certain grace notes, spinning stylistic cadenzas around the narrative core. King Hu, doyen of the Hong Kong sword-play film, realized early in his career that "if the plots are simple, the stylistic delivery will be even richer."<sup>8</sup> What Western fans consider "over the top" in Hong Kong movies is partly a richness of stylistic delivery—an effort to see how delightful or thrilling one can make the mix of dialogue, music, sound effects, light, color, and movement. Realism is less important than a bold expressiveness in every dimension. In particular, physical activity can achieve a real magnificence when it is sustained and embellished. This delight in expressive technique is a local elaboration of the sensuous abundance sought by popular filmmakers everywhere.

In the art of popular cinema, vivid visuals are shot through with emotion. In order to attract a mass audience, popular art deals in emotions like anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and indignation.<sup>9</sup> Since these feelings evidently operate in all cultures, a film that appeals to them travels well. Entertainment mobilizes playground passions, direct responses to blatant aggression, kindness, or selfishness. Cinema is particularly good at arousing emotions kinesthetically, through action and music. Bruce Lee asked his students to give their fighting techniques "emotional content," such as purposefully directed anger.<sup>10</sup> When this quality is captured in vigorous, strictly patterned movement, in nicely judged framings and crackling cutting, with overwhelming music and sound effects, you can feel yourself tensing and twitching to the rhythms of the fight. This is filmic emotion at its most sheerly physical.



1.9 *The Chinese Feast*: Ka-fai checks Sun's sincerity by seeing if her picture has the privileged place in his wallet.

We are told that mass entertainment favors simple, pure states of feeling, but plainly it works with mixed emotions too. One aim of mass art is to make you laugh through your tears, to give you a smile and a lump in your throat. In *The Chinese Feast* (1995), Ka-fai (Anita Yuen) has taken off her chef's hat, but her hair stays erect in a Woody Woodpecker topknot. This adds an exuberant zaniness to the romantic climax, when Sun (Leslie Cheung) confesses his love (Fig. 1.9). Still, popular plotting does exploit manichean opposites: self-sacrifice is sharpened by contrast with cruelty, generosity by contrast with greed. In *Task Force* (1997), the policewoman Shirley (Karen Mok) returns to the apartment she shares with her boyfriend, Kelvin. He has ignored her, dodged appointments, and skipped her father's funeral. Everything has aroused our indignation at Kelvin's callousness. Now Shirley has decided to leave him. She comes to claim her things while her partner, Rod, waits outside in the car. The scene dwells on Shirley drifting wistfully around the apartment. Suddenly, cut outside to show her returning to Rod, telling him she's decided to take away none of her things after all. The abruptness of the transition seems to mark her sharp decision to accept the breakup with Kelvin. The two drive off, and a tear trickles down from behind Shirley's sunglasses. But then we realize that the sudden cut to her entering the car omitted a piece of action. We now get a miniflashback showing her angrily pulling down bookshelves, knocking over the stereo, and generally laying waste to Kelvin's life. Shirley's surge of righteous anger stands out more strongly against the suggestion that she took his indifference passively, and we get to feel both pity for her and satisfaction at her retribution.

The opponent of mass culture objects that this tactic indulges the audience, letting it "have things both ways." But popular film strives for a wide-open emotional range, and having things both ways perfectly suits that purpose. Entertainment aims to chart the highest highs and the lowest lows. The tactic is seen most strikingly in the "double ending," which al-

lows the characters' fortunes to sink abysmally before the plot swerves into a happy ending, sometimes one of stupendous implausibility. Mabel Cheung's *Autumn's Tale* (1987) centers on Jenny (Cherie Chung) and Piggy (Chow Yun-fat), both Hong Kong émigrés living in Manhattan. Jenny tries to reform Piggy, a happy-go-lucky wastrel working at menial jobs and overfond of drinking and brawling. When he seems to have fallen into his old ways again, Jenny accepts a job as an *au pair* on Long Island. As she prepares to leave her apartment, Piggy races to bring her a present, for which he has traded his beloved wreck of a car. He catches up with her just as her old boyfriend prepares to drive her to Long Island. They say an awkward good-bye and exchange gifts. As she drives off Piggy runs tentatively after her, arousing our hope that he will catch up with her for a happier resolution, but he gives up the chase.

The scene of separation fills nearly ten minutes. Yet the movie is not over. In an epilogue, Jenny and her charge, Anna, are strolling on a Long Island beach. Jenny says that she once had a friend who dreamed of owning a café on the pier. Suddenly they find that a café is there. "Table for two?" Piggy beams at them as the film ends. We have no idea how much time has elapsed since Jenny left Manhattan, no clue as to how Piggy has earned enough money to set up his business. In defiance of probability, an abrupt two-minute epilogue offers the audience a second ending, a casually miraculous reunion proving Piggy's reformation. Cheung has remarked: "I know that in real life the heroine and the hero are bound to go separate ways. But in the film, I am free to write the ending as I wish . . . I wanted [Piggy] still to have hope, so I added the fairytale element."<sup>11</sup>

Taken to the extreme, the switches in emotional register seen in *Task Force* and *An Autumn's Tale* can become a reckless mix of moods. Popular cinema delights in jamming together very diverse splendors.<sup>12</sup> One of the screenwriters for the *Lethal Weapon* series explains:

A lot of it I recognize as pure sentimentality, but people love it. All of that bonding stuff between Mel and Danny is corny, but people love it—Mel kind of crying and spitting and telling Danny that he loves him and he's like a brother, Danny kind of cradling Mel in his arms. That stuff is so hokey and so corny, but it works. They make it work. Then you throw in, out of nowhere, the most unexpected kind of humor, whether it's the silly gags of Mel eating a dog biscuit or Joe Pesci's character. So you have this kind of Mulligan stew that never slows down: that keeps jumping from pathos to sentimentality to deep emotion to pure action.<sup>13</sup>

This urge for kaleidoscopic variety elevates momentary vividness above broad dramatic form. A Hong Kong film can dump a cornucopia at your feet. Forty-three seconds into Wong Jing's *Boys Are Easy* (1993) we get a gun battle and car chase, followed by a procession of beautiful young men and women entangled in a comedy of mistaken identity. We get a male

striptease, a satire of triads, a farcical game of poker, an animated demon representing one character's weak side, a musical number in praise of bowling, LSD hallucinations, a necktie that pops upright à la Tex Avery, and a scene in which a woman records each night's orgasms by notching her bedroom wall. *Boys Are Easy* is an extreme case, but most Hong Kong films do not generally aspire to the Hollywood tradition of tight plotting that runs from, say, Keaton's *Our Hospitality* (1923) and Lubitsch's *The Marriage Circle* (1924) to *Die Hard* (1988) and *Groundhog Day* (1993).<sup>14</sup> Hong Kong plots tend to be organized around vivid moments, fights or chases or comic turns or melodramatic catastrophes. The creators' skill lies in making each set piece powerful and in livening up the connecting passages.

An emphasis on striking moments leads naturally to a scavenger aesthetic. In today's Hong Kong thrillers you cannot escape scenes lifted from *Die Hard* and *Speed* (1994), complete with snatches of the original scores. For *The Chinese Feast* Tsui Hark swipes the plot from kung-fu movies, the theme of food from the Taiwanese movie *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994), and the premise of a cooking contest from a Japanese TV show. For good measure Tsui recycles (and improves) ideas from a previous film of his own, *The Banquet* (1991). If popular cinema often seems shameless, it is partly because its commitment to vivacious moments encourages filmmakers to grab anything that has already proved alluring.

The same impulse governs the reliance on conventions, unkindly called formulas and clichés—all those laughable, taken-for-granted devices that communicate instantly. Conventions are the lifeblood of popular art. Cowboys can dodge bullets, boy and girl “meet cute,” and endings are usually happy. Villains have bad aim, except when it comes to wounding the hero's friends. Hong Kong cinema relies shamelessly on the oldest contrivances of entertainment: eavesdropping, mistaken identity, confusion of twins or accidental lookalikes, wretchedly inadequate disguise, and coincidental encounters that complicate or resolve the plot. If a woman dresses as a man, everyone takes her as one; when she returns to woman's costume, no one recognizes her resemblance to the man. When you are angry with your lover, you tear up his or her photo. In Hong Kong night is not black but blue, and terribly bright. Caucasians usually look large and Australian, and they speak English with an accent known nowhere on the planet.

Hong Kong action films are rich in such artifice. Even the harmless-looking citizen knows kung-fu. A half-frozen man can suddenly recover and somersault over a car. Immediately after a stinging blow, the victim bruises horribly. If someone has a pistol, somebody else will become a hostage, with that pistol pointed to his or her head. During a gunfight, someone is sure to run out of ammunition at a crucial moment. A cop wounded in a firefight will show up later with a bit of gauze taped to his forehead. A man can have an arm hacked off and still fight, and win. During a kung-fu

combat, if blood trickles from a character's mouth, death is usually at hand. Certain wounds heal miraculously: a bullet smacks into the hero's leg, and he cries in agony; a few shots later he is limping; a few shots later the leg is as good as new, though stained a bit red.

Vulgarity, pictorial storytelling, the pull of sensuous wonders and emotional intensity, the mélange of tonal switches and vivid moments and tested conventions: these are essential ingredients of popular cinema. But their power comes at a price. Because entertainment favors forcefulness, and because it strives to offer a grab-bag of attractions, we shouldn't be surprised that it harbors some questionable impulses. For example, Hong Kong cinema is very brutal. Women suffer terribly in most action films, a circumstance not offset by the woman-warrior tradition. Although one can argue that the territory's low crime rate suggests that viewers aren't imitating what they see, the casual acceptance of rapes, beatings, and bloodshed may have more pervasive social effects. The films also put prejudices on display. Non-Asians, particularly blacks, are almost always corrupt and rapacious, while some Asians, such as Hong Kong's ubiquitous Filipinas, become virtually invisible. Attitudes toward law and justice seem particularly blinkered: again and again, it is taken for granted that police—even our heroes—will torture suspects. In its search for powerful sensations, this cinema becomes sensationalistic.

At the same time, like much Asian popular culture, it can be blandly infantile. A cop in *Chungking Express* lives surrounded by big stuffed kitties. Anita Yuen, a reigning ingenue star, takes pride in her Mickey Mouse collectibles. Hong Kong film does not oscillate quite as startlingly between scalding violence and cloying cuteness as Japanese entertainment does, but both traditions often suggest that to be grown up is to be aggressive, and the only way to be gentle is to regress into childhood.<sup>15</sup>

Often, too, the films simply invoke conventions without vital commitment or revivification. There is too much facetious music during comic scenes. There is a lot of visual bombast, especially slow motion and exaggerated angles. The urge to grip the audience has created a cinema that is often overbusy, with little room for the contemplative moments that make other popular cinemas rich. Having mastered certain skills supremely, particularly the power to generate excitement through vigorous action, Hong Kong directors have not generally sought to stretch themselves in other directions. By training their audience to expect ever more rapid-fire gratification, they have too often cramped their craft.

But despite these faults, many Hong Kong films display qualities that we value in any art, high or low, modern or classic. They have structural ingenuity (echoic motifs, contrapuntal story parallels), functional beauty of style (for example, bold cutting and dynamic composition), expressive intensity (through the manipulation of tone, color, and rousing physicality), appeal to common feelings and experiences (loneliness, injustice, the loss that triggers revenge, the hunger for love), and originality (for example, the

constant reworking of conventions in directors as various as King Hu, John Woo, Tsui Hark, and Wong Kar-wai. Most of these virtues are tied to the mass nature of the enterprise: they make it more likely that the film will provide an arresting experience for a wide range of viewers.<sup>16</sup> These qualities don't negate what is socially or morally objectionable in the films, but because of its need to capitalize on current trends, to repeat tried forms and turn them in fresh but not alienating directions, any popular cinema is unlikely to be wholly on the side of the angels.

To orchestrate an abundance of appeals you need craft. Intellectuals who expatiate on the cultural significance of a movie or pop song pay virtually no attention to the ways in which the artisan has used the medium. Perhaps they think it's simple to make amusing, exciting, tear-jerking movies. Let them try. Mass entertainment looks easy only to those who have not struggled to shoot a coherent scene, write a passable song, or draw a decent cartoon. The most minimal competence in filmmaking is an achievement to be prized; many of today's young directors could profitably study the Roy Del Ruths of the Golden Age. "A great director," Andrew Sarris once noted, "has to be at least a good director."<sup>17</sup> And more expert filmmaking cannot consist in merely following rules by rote, for no two situations are exactly the same. The old hand knows the routine practices, the standard solutions, and then adapts them to fresh situations—perhaps setting up technical problems to be ingeniously overcome. Craft demands flexibility, ingenuity, and no small amount of imagination. The direct, forceful effects prized by the popular aesthetic are often the product of subtle shaping.

In entertainment film, the artisan's imagination goes to work upon well-defined norms. "Polishing the jade," the Chinese call it. Seeking originality at all costs can lead to chaos, but quietly refining the tradition enriches the art and refines the perceiver's sensibility. Yet popular filmmakers innovate as well: King Hu cut *Touch of Zen's* airborne combat in a way that eliminated normal cues for position and trajectory, and thereby recast the conventions he had inherited. Setting oneself a craft problem and solving it in a fresh, virtuosic, but absolutely comprehensible way may be one equivalent in popular cinema for the experimental daring we find in the avant-garde.

If we want to understand how a popular cinema's artisans mobilize a range of appeals, we cannot neglect form and style. We must learn to look closely. We must examine popular films as wholes, seeking out what makes them cohere (or not). We must probe their moment-by-moment texture. We should scrutinize climaxes, like Shirley's leaving Kelvin in *Task Force*, as well as low-key passages, always trying—though it's hard, especially in a kinetic cinema like Hong Kong's—to suggest through words and photos what a sequence looks like.<sup>18</sup>

Just as analyzing Beethoven involves acknowledging the formal tradi-

tions that developed within Viennese classicism, understanding popular art requires awareness of its craft practices. We can usefully trace out the proximate conditions of production—the filmmaking institutions, shaped by the customs that govern the filmmaker’s tacit assumptions about everything from running times and character development to lighting patterns and the musical score. To become a proficient filmmaker is to learn a repertoire of skills, and often those skills are routinized in order to benefit the mode of production.

For example, in a typical Hollywood scene many shots simply repeat camera positions in ABAB alternation. (See Figs. 1.10–1.16.) Thanks to this technique, the viewer can take an already-seen view as read and concentrate on the slight changes that occur in the actor’s performance—a shift of glance, a tiny movement (Figs. 1.11–1.14). In addition, after an ABABA series of repeated setups, a change to setup C can carry a greater emphasis than it would in a constantly varying string of setups (say, ABCDE). (See Figs. 1.15–1.16.) Alternating repeated setups has practical value too. The filmmaker can save time by filming all the shots from setup A—say, all the medium-shots of Neil McCauley—in succession. Then the camera can be shifted, and all the shots of Kelso from position B can be made. In the editing process, the shots from setups A and B are intercut. Or the filmmaker can use two cameras at once, as Michael Mann did in our scene from *Heat*.<sup>19</sup> Stylistic patterning meshes with craft practice: artistic economy has arisen from production economies.

Paying attention to craft also allows us to confront one last objection to popular film’s mass-production origins. Bulk filmmaking is that System which screenwriters and critics have been railing against for eighty years; it is, we are told, what keeps movies meretricious and clichéd. Yet there is much to be said for it. At the least, mass-market filmmaking has imposed a discipline on its makers, fostering a commitment to professional responsibility. One motto of mass filmmaking might well be that of Steve Jobs hurrying his staff to finish the Macintosh: “Real artists ship.” Industrialized



1.10 A dialogue scene in Michael Mann’s *Heat* (1995) begins with a “master shot.”



1.11 An analytical cut highlights McCauley.



1.12 A reverse-angle shot on Kelso allows us to see his reaction.



1.13 The cutting shifts back and forth across several shots, always presenting each man from the same camera position.



1.14 After several replays of the same camera setup on Kelso, the turning of his head becomes a significant action.





1.15 The camera shows McCauley from a new angle in order to bring in new information: the reflection of Nate in the distance.



1.16 A fresh setup shows Nate more clearly, and a new phase of the scene begins.

filmmaking also has creative dimensions. It obliges filmmakers to become expert in some quite unusual human accomplishments. It's no small matter to tell a story cogently on film or to lead a jaundiced audience to feel deep emotions. The mode of production encourages filmmakers to explore and refine material that has proven appealing. In asking creators to master formula, the mode of production also expects them to exploit it skillfully, as when *Peking Opera Blues* builds an engaging piece of cinema out of bedroom farce. The filmmaker who can make clichés sing will often be rewarded. And sometimes the mode of production rewards filmmakers for turning cliché on its head.

It is therefore misleading to call a mass-output film industry an assembly-line system. Two films produced by MGM were never analogous to two Thunderbirds rolling out of Dearborn. Movies are made by what Marx called "serial manufacture," whereby a group of artisans collaborate in planning and producing a unique object.<sup>20</sup> Popular filmmaking is a collective effort, but the result is no more uniform than the plays mounted by a repertory troupe. It is deplorable that Hollywood had no room for a Dreyer or a Tati, but it did have room for many other artists whose gifts meshed

with the demands of the industry. Japan, with a system as vertically integrated as Hollywood's, nourished such diverse talents as Ozu, Mizoguchi, and Kurosawa. Far from outlawing imaginative innovation, the System often encourages it. Products must be differentiated, and originality (as in the case of Hitchcock, Ford, and others) can be good business.

Still, we should not confine ourselves to the exceptional works. To appreciate how King Hu's bamboo-grove sequence gives flying swordsmen a new élan, we need to examine the more common ways of staging and cutting action sequences. If we want to know how films work and work upon us, we must try to understand the most banal protocols of craft.

In any mode of film practice, innovation is bounded by certain limits, but only the wildest romantics think that artistic creativity occurs without any constraints. And the System, fearsome as it is, doesn't know in advance exactly what all the limits are. Creation, in a popular cinema as in any other circumstances, is an open-ended exploration. It's just that here the exploration starts from the well-honed routines of craft.

The rest of this book explores the art of Hong Kong popular cinema since the early 1970s. Chapter 2 considers how the film industry has functioned in its local circumstances, while Chapters 3 and 4 spiral outward, examining how this cinema gained a regional audience, and then a Western one. Chapter 5 surveys local production methods and craft traditions, the ways in which a movie gets made in Hong Kong. Chapters 6 and 7 go on to examine norms of genre, stars, stories, and style. Chapter 8 focuses on some ways in which Hong Kong action movies achieve their overwhelming force. And Chapter 9 moves to the fringes to suggest how experimental tendencies can emerge from an unabashedly commercial film industry. Sandwiched between most chapters are interludes, analytical appreciations that expand on an issue, an important filmmaker, or a representative film.

Making a case for entertainment doesn't oblige us to believe that popular cinema is the only kind worth discussing. While some people await the replacement of movies by cyberspace and Virtual Reality, I think that we ought to search out those artists who still create extraordinary films in the Web age. Some are "art-cinema" directors like Abbas Kiarostami, Jean-Luc Godard, Theo Angelopoulos, Hou Hsiao-Hsien, and Kitano Takeshi. Others, giving large audiences something extravagant and gratuitously wild, are to be found in Hong Kong.