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Corpo-reality in the Hong Kong New Wave

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> The symbolic field is occupied by a single object from which it derives its unity. . . . This object is the human body.
>
> —Roland Bathes, *S/Z*

The first scene in *Dangerous Encounter—First Kind* (1980, dir. Tsui Hark) is curious, even perplexing. The camera first tracks away from the glass panes in a door with the radio warning about possible landslides. The image is slightly distorted by the wide-angle lens. Then, filmed from a low angle, barbed wire streams from the right to the left in a lateral pan, and on the soundtrack the news continues enumerating headlines, including people donating blood and boys drowned in a nearby reservoir. The images of wire are next intercut with the camera probing the interior space of an apartment, supposedly the other side of the space the audience did not see in the first shot. Thunder breaks, and the rain begins pouring. With the forward tracking toward the deep end of the space, we finally arrive at, in front of a window and beside a candle stuck with pins, a cage of white mice, startled by the rumbling. What follows is several short close-ups, of mice and of the rain beating down. A hand appears in an extreme close-up, holding a mouse. The other hand picks a pin from the candle, smooths the fur on the top of the mouse's head, and stabs it there. The poor little thing screams and circles around, before being picked up from the tail and put back into the cage, with the director's name superimposed on the image.

How should we make sense of this credits scene? Later in the plot, we retrospectively discover the film opens in one of the characters' apartments, where she tortures and enjoys her power over harmless mice; it demonstrates the perversion of her character as she inflicts such senseless violence. We can also read this scene as an allegory that condenses the plot, a trope widely used in classical Hollywood. Our three protagonists are the mice; the hands are a metaphor for the invisible force of Hong Kong society that causes so much pain to these unknowing adolescents that they opt for

anarchism and disrupt the lives of others in the cage.[1] However, these two interpretations are insufficient to explain why the director needs to confront his audience with the pain of the pierced skull. Why is it necessary to invoke physical sensations to offer, in David Bordwell's terms, a "blistering criticism of social inequalities in the colony"?[2] Moreover, this intense corporeal sensuality seems to not only belong to Tsui (though he is definitely one of the most representative directors in the trend) but also to Ann Hui, Dennis Yu, and other important filmmakers at the time. This concern for the body thus provides an opportunity to reexamine the aesthetic achievements of the Hong Kong New Wave in its historical and political context, and an occasion to tear down various presuppositions that are imposed upon these films.

In other words, the emphasis on the body lets us reopen the case of the Hong Kong New Wave through a different modernist paradigm, one not totally subsumed under the formal innovations of the French New Wave and the subsequent European modernist films. This renewed critique is thus aimed at two separate but connected biases: that 1960s cinematic modernism is the quintessential standard of stylistic experimentation and that cinematic modernism is a de-corporealized aesthetics. Since the 1960s, every new wave needs to be measured against the French New Wave, depending on how close or far this "local" venture is from *Breathless* (1960, dir. Jean-Luc Godard). The shadow casted by the *nouvelle vague* envelops both its concurrent film movement, like the Japanese New Wave, and other posterior ones in the 1970s and the 1980s, including Taiwanese New Cinema and the Fifth Generation of Chinese filmmakers. Specifically, when evaluating Asian new waves, the discursive construction of the "newness" is dominated by a concentric model, starting from the West and then spreading to the East, from metropolitan modernity to periphery.[3] In short, modernist films that are not made in Western countries become local, inferior versions with exotic flavors, falling short of high modernist abstractions, existential crises, and philosophical solitude. Marginalized and particularized to favor only postcolonial and cultural readings, they do not contribute to the global history of cinema. Form is not their strength.[4]

In addition, this modernist approach prioritizes form over content, discourse over story, and mind over body. These binary pairs often neglect how content, story, or the body comes to structure the mise-en-scène of a

1. For a systematic analysis of this trope, see Thierry Kuntzel's "The Film-Work," *Enclitic* 2, no. 1 (1978): 39–61.
2. David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 84.
3. Mary Louise Pratt, "Modernity and Periphery: Toward a Global and Relational Analysis," in *Beyond Dichotomies: Histories, Identities, Cultures and the Challenge of Globalization*, ed. Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 21–47.
4. For an excellent reconsideration of this paradigm, see James Tweedie's *The Age of New Waves: Art Cinema and the Staging of Globalization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

film, as if the former is the mold and the latter is just inanimate material waiting to be shaped. For example, András Bálint Kovács's excellent survey of European modernist cinema, *Screening Modernism* (2007), itemizes every possible permutation of art cinema and parametric narrations that were first conceptualized in Bordwell's *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1985).[5] Nevertheless, throughout Kovács's argument, it is less important to see the organic relation between *syuzhet* and *fabula*, a tendency exemplified by the title of the second section of the book, "The Forms of Modernism."[6] Surely, these are the salient characteristics of modernist films. Yet, what if we also see the body as one of the parameters that a director can manipulate, since bodies on screen summon characters, provide anchors of identification, and engage the audience sensually? A modernist body, then. It can be allegorical, but it never loses its sensuous incarnation.[7] This ignored dimension is one reason that most critics cannot appreciate the Hong Kong New Wave. This stress on the body further exposes that, in narrative cinema, between form and content, there is always the intervening factor of the body.

In this chapter, I argue that a two-pronged reassessment is necessary for ridding our partial blindness to a more inclusive historiography of modernist cinema, a blindness that demotes many intriguing experiments of the Hong Kong New Wave to the aesthetic margins. With references to several evaluations of the Hong Kong New Wave, I contend that we should revise our conception of a new wave to recognize peculiarities of these films. This is the first move to imagine something beyond *imperial aesthetics*, beyond the traditional modernist paradigm that erects some European films as unsurpassable milestones. Then, to theorize this aesthetics, I draw on Gilles Deleuze's concept of the body-image to consider the centrality of the body in an alternative modernist epistemology. The body-image serves as a yardstick to fathom how the reality manifested on screen is constituted by bodily contestations within the colonial status quo and identity anxiety in *The Imp* (1981, dir. Dennis Yu), *The Happening* (1980, dir. Yim Ho) and *We're Going to Eat You* (1980, dir. Tsui Hark). This is no longer an aesthetics that prefers disinterestedness over too-close engagement. The new aesthetic landscape is drawn through visceral configurations of cinema, the corpo-reality of the Hong Kong New Wave.

5. David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 205–33, 274–310.
6. András Bálint Kovács, *Screening Modernism: European Art Cinema, 1950–1980* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), vi–vii.
7. Here I refer to the definition of figure given by Erich Auerbach in his "Figura." See Erich Auerbach, "Figura," in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 29.

Beyond the *Nouvelle Vague*

Since the late 1970s, Hong Kong critics have debated the contribution of the Hong Kong New Wave to the local film industry and to the history of cinema in general. Before the movement, the market was—still is—dominated by genre films, comprising mostly martial arts films and comedies made by the Shaw Brothers and Golden Harvest. The new cinema injected new blood to localize the traditional filmmaking that was founded upon Chinese culture, which had become more distant (the emergence of a new Hong Kong identity) and more anxiety provoking (the reintegration into China). Bordwell raises the issue in passing when he surmises that "[the New Wave's] energy reshaped Hong Kong cinema into a modern and distinctive part of the territory's mass culture."[8] However, he does not pause to elaborate on exactly how the screenscape is modernized. This is the common narrative for any new wave: the old tradition is dying and anemic, waiting for the new generation to sweep in and vitalize the ossified, withered structure of filmmaking in this or that country. What seems lacking here is attention in the rhetoric of local critics to the aesthetic uniqueness of these Hong Kong films. Put otherwise, the so-called Hong Kong New Wave might be mediocre in comparison with other cinematic landmarks. The burden of the *nouvelle vague* takes a toll on the full appreciation of these screen phenomena. In pursuing the name of the New Wave, the critics could only push themselves in the direction of localization: a Western formula with Hong Kong ingredients.

In his "The Film Criticism Fad of the 'New Wave,'" Feng Mao succinctly summarizes how diverging opinions wrangle over the merits and shortcomings of these emerging directors and their works.[9] He singles out five major contentions concerning this film movement:

1. The dispute about the definition of the New Wave and the categorization in the analysis.
2. The dispute about the innovation of the New Wave and their inherited tradition.
3. The dispute about the expectation of New Wave films and directors and their actual outcomes.
4. The discussion about the New Wave and its relation with cultural tradition and local culture.
5. Whether New Wave films are just cultural products and playthings of the petite bourgeoisie.[10]

8. Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong*, 4.
9. See Feng Mao, "'Xin lang chao' de ying ping feng," in *Liu zou de ji qing: ba ling nian dai xiang gang dian ying*, ed. Ka Ming (Hong Kong: Xiang gang dian ying ping lun xue hui, 2009), 86–103. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.
10. "'Xin lang chao' de ying ping feng," 95.

First, the anxiety about periodization is certainly symptomatic of an urge to anoint the breakthroughs that these young directors initiated. By naming it a New Wave, if it ever succeeds, the movement is elevated from the local to the global. Nevertheless, the application of the term New Wave is being questioned repeatedly in later scholarship and criticism. This ambivalence betrays a certain self-doubt toward the historical position and heritage of a local film movement, whose impact on the history of cinema might appear miniscule. Somehow, the legitimacy of the Hong Kong New Wave could only be established from within, from Chinese culture and Hong Kong's economic and historical situations, not from without, from a global perspective that unabashedly focuses on the singularities of these works in bringing out a new aesthetic vision.

The problem of legitimacy is indeed what Serge Daney brings up in "The Diary of Hong Kong," published in the 1981 February issue of *Cahiers du Cinéma*; five months later, the article was translated by Kam Wah and reprinted in *City Entertainment Magazine* (電影雙周刊), the most prestigious film magazine in Hong Kong.[11] "It seems to me that the moment I arrive at Hong Kong would be when we can judge the first results of this transplant that was not wild anymore: disappointing. On the one hand because the industry is quite unable to do anything other than making a quick buck with the minimum quality. On the other because this new generation, nourished by television, could not rely on any actual tradition of Chinese cinema," Daney opines.[12] Daney's criticism almost dictates the tone of later criticisms of this movement. In another widely read article, Law Kar's "An Overview of Hong Kong's New Wave Cinema," the narrative to demean artistic accomplishments of the Hong Kong New Wave emerges more emphatically than ever. Law attempts to balance the two polar viewpoints concerning this chapter of Hong Kong cinema. Some critics praise the contemporaneity of the new cinema. Others, like Rogar Garcia, flatly refuse to acknowledge New Wave's achievement: "But there was no new aesthetic landscape. Thus, the new films, when compared to those of the French New Wave, neither were aesthetically new, nor did they open doors to cinema."[13] Law Kar's compromise between the two is to see "the term New Wave . . . [referring] to the use of innovative techniques, an urban sensibility, interest in new visual styles, and more personal means of expression."[14] In the end, Law adopts a critical model dominated by the French New Wave and its aesthetic imperialism to trace the history of the Hong Kong New Wave, while unintentionally

11. See Serge Daney's "Journal de Hong-Kong," *Cahiers du Cinéma* (February 1981): 27–34; and "'Dian ying bi ji' zhu bian kan xiang gang xin dian ying," *Dian ying shuang zhou kan* (June 25, 1981): 20.
12. Serge Daney, "Journal de Hong-Kong," 27.
13. Law Kar, "An Overview of Hong Kong's New Wave Cinema," in *At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World*, ed. Esther C. M. Yau (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 47.
14. "An Overview of Hong Kong's New Wave Cinema," 47.

obscuring the latter's aesthetics. These Hong Kong films, provincially made, are not "stylistically innovative" enough. This value judgment is often taken for granted. The only possible way to redeem these films is through various allusions to Western canonical films to testify to the quality of the works made in Hong Kong (e.g., *We Are Going to Eat You* and Hollywood zombie films, *The Sword* [1980, dir. Patrick Tam] and its aesthetic affiliation with the style of Jean-Pierre Melville). This deluge of self-criticism—and even self-deprecation—speaks to the fear of enunciating on the behalf of the universal in regional cinema studies.[15]

Speaking on the behalf of the universal risks generalization, for it might set up another series of discriminating standards to suppress marginal voices. Generalization might also distort the materials at hand for argumentative purposes. However—backing off from the radicalizing tendency of universalizing rhetoric—this mode of address can also be a bold affirmation of the aesthetic and sensual distinctiveness of a film movement, usually flattened under the pressure of existent paradigms. Most critics weigh in on the cultural, institutional, and stylistic affinities between the French New Wave and its Hong Kong "derivative." Certainly, there are striking similarities in their contribution to foment a cultural atmosphere for a "modern" cinema. For instance, television plays a role, albeit differently, in the emergence of these two waves,[16] and film journals become the flagships to praise and advertise these films.[17] This comparative approach, almost without exception, diminishes the oriental latecomer for the sake of reinforcing the canonization, disregarding any differences by using the same French scale. To speak about these Hong Kong films affirmatively, as a strategy, is to recognize and assert their status in the history of cinema, while being careful about its potentially overly ambitious scope.[18] Using these films as our touchstone, we might gain further insights into their audacity and have a more expansive horizon to accommodate other similar experiments without ironing out the

15. In other words, the Hong Kong New Wave is only an imitation; this is still how critics see the movement. For a recent example, see Vivian P. Y. Lee's "The Hong Kong New Wave: A Critical Reappraisal," in *The Chinese Cinema Book*, ed. Song Hwee Lim and Julian Ward (London: British Film Institute, 2011). Vivian P. Y. Lee writes, "Using Western cinematic techniques and narrative strategies to address local issues and subject matter, New Wave films reinvigorated the local film industry" (131).
16. See Dudley Andrew's introduction to *André Bazin's New Media*, trans. Dudley Andrew (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 1–34. For the symbiotic relationship between television and cinema in Hong Kong, see Pat Tong Cheuk's *Hong Kong New Wave Cinema (1978–2000)* (London: Intellect Books, 2008), 29–51.
17. See Michel Marie's *The French New Wave: An Artistic School*, trans. Richard Neupert (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 5–25; and Law Kar, "Overview of Hong Kong's New Wave Cinema," 38–40.
18. Paul Willemen's astute analysis of third cinema as a concept highlights the productive push against universality through affirmative otherness: "The challenge to English [theoretical-critical work's] aspirations towards universality is not to pose a counter-universality but actively to seek to learn about as well as promote other ways of making sense" (37). See Paul Willemen, "The Third Cinema Question: Notes and Reflections," *Framework* 34 (1987): 4–38.

discrepancies. Through the lens of the body, a tactical shift is necessitated, away from the sole prioritization of form to the intricate corporeal reciprocity between *syuzhet* and *fabula*.

An example is thus in order. Dennis Yu's *The Imp* is often considered the most successful attempt at revamping the horror genre in Hong Kong cinema. It is often said that the film absorbed the notably thrilling and horrific elements from *The Exorcist* (1973, dir. William Friedkin) and *The Omen* (1976, dir. Richard Donner). The influence is undeniable, but the evocation of body horror also brings out the difficult labor of a Hong Kong identity. The story is about a young man who has trouble keeping a stable job while his wife is expecting. He eventually secures a job as a security guard in an office building infested with supernatural interferences. Later the audience finds out these strange occurrences are connected to the fetus in his wife's belly, the eponymous imp who tries to reincarnate to take its revenge on humanity. The innocent protagonist, as the film tells us, is destined to meet Rosemary's baby because he was born in the wrong hour of the wrong day in the wrong year. Chow Sze Chung has pointed out that the film can be interpreted as a spatial allegory that attempts to tear apart Hong Kong as people knew it in the 1980s. The main setting of the film is in Admiralty on Hong Kong Island, located at the heart of commercial and political activity, where the British first landed. Putting spatial, geographical, and historical details in perspective, we might say the haunted place is—no longer only ghostly—a fable of Hong Kong's modernization.[19] Unknowingly, as with the protagonist, people on the island are doomed to the modernizing nightmare from the beginning.

This interpretation, though valid, is delivered allegorically. Allegorical interpretation, as Erich Auerbach understands it, attempts to "'spirit away' the historical character."[20] In this instance, the historical character is preserved, but the corporeal dimension is contained and insulated. This is no surprise: you either choose form or choose content; the former universal, the latter regional. The body is only one element among many on the level of the content, relegated to a subsidiary status. The direct engagement with the corpo-reality figured onscreen, prevalent in horror film, is reduced to the meaning-making process of sublimating unnamable sensations.[21] The body on screen, when not presented as a character or an agent, is always an excess that overflows the allegorical and formal analysis. How should we identify the titillating and sometimes revolting affect when seeing a limb, a pool of

19. Chow Sze Chung, "Zhao huan lao you ling, xiang shi dai tao jiao—wei ji bu gang chan pian zhong duo shi di," *Liu zou de ji qing: ba ling nian dai xiang gang dian ying*, ed. Ka Ming (Hong Kong: Xiang gang dian ying ping lun xue hui, 2009), 20–21.
20. Auerbach, "Figura," 36.
21. For the seminal text on this issue, see Linda William's "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1991): 2–13.

blood, or a gory torture? These bodily materials onscreen are not conducive to thinking; they obstruct the path to the mental-image.[22] The French New Wave and the paradigm of modernist cinema have no space for such corporeal surpluses, since their protagonists and the onscreen embodiments are distant, reflexive, and drifting toward whimsical desperation. The sensorimotor schema might be suspended, but the characters are also becoming *images*, crystal clear and pensive, like the spectacular actress from *Cleo from 5 to 7* (1962, dir. Agnès Varda). This *nouvelle vague* model contributes to the fundamental ignorance of the body and the Hong Kong New Wave.

The corpo-reality is yet to be theorized and commented upon. Before advancing any extrapolation, I want to return to *The Imp* to elucidate what exactly the corpo-reality is. Among several excruciating scenes in the film, there is one sequence in which security guards gather in the control room, ready to enjoy the dog-meat hot pot. The camera, at first, stays outside, looking in at the table on which the pot is steaming, then panning to the left and showing the protagonist, Keung (Charlie Chin), enter the room. A cut subsequently brings the audience to the table. The camera closely observes one character after another before perching on Keung's shoulder. The conversation is boisterous, and Mr. Hong Kong (Wong Ching), who butchered the dog, explains how annoying it was to rummage through the trash bin. Other guards hesitate to pick a piece from the pot before being convinced by its benefits to men's virility. Several close-ups ensue with chit-chat about how Keung was stuck in the elevator in the previous scene. We move back to a middle shot; the camera rotates around the table almost unnoticeably. Mr. Hong Kong blames Keung for being superstitious and says that he has a bowl of black dog blood that can dispel spirits. As if to rebuke his blasphemy, the power is cut off momentarily. The next shot is a close-up of Mr. Hong Kong, devouring a piece of dog meat and suffocating. He clutches his throat as if somebody is grabbing him, with his eyes rolling up, sweat coming out from every pore, and saliva and food debris dropping. Other guards try to help him without any success. The camera retreats to the outside again, watching Mr. Hong Kong throw himself over the window and vomit out congee-like stuff on the glass.

The allegorical analysis of the sequence cannot escape the theme of dog meat, since the consumption of dog meat is a taboo in Western culture. Hence, to produce proper Western subjects, the act of consuming dog meat must be prohibited so the underlying Asianness of Hong Kong is not exposed. Ultimately, the film is about this process of giving a difficult birth to an imp that symbolizes the slowly gestating Hong Kong identity. That the man who eats dogs should be eliminated seems inevitable so that Western ethics can be

22. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (London: Continuum, 2005), 201–19.

in-corporated into Hong Kong.[23] This reading should be buttressed with the corpo-reality of the scene. The semiconsciousness of the imp seems uncannily embodied by the gliding gaze of the camera. The unseen fetus strikes when Mr. Hong Kong claims the dog blood would protect him. Floating and silently waiting for the right moment, suddenly, the haunting imp materializes and corporealizes in pain and suffering. Its invisible presence comes to be felt through the onscreen contortion of the character. How apt it is to have Mr. Hong Kong go through this possession and exorcism as if Hong Kong, as a colony, needs to be defiled and purified. The corporeal drama here involves both strong sensations on screen (the content) and the unsettling mise-en-scène and camera movements (the form) with the human or animal body as the necessary mediator. This entanglement is corpo-reality.

The reinvention of a low genre like horror seems antagonistic to any sort of modernist project. The preference of mind over body or intellect over sensation is one reason that this film cannot be fully integrated into the *nouvelle vague* discourse, French or otherwise. To move beyond the *nouvelle vague* is not to refute its importance but to see and critique its Eurocentric limitations, constraints, and its desire to leave the sensual, filthy, and agonizing body out of the picture.[24] We need, instead, to put a certain kind of body back between form and content to analyze films that are unduly neglected within modernist cinema since the 1960s. Among the "forms of modernism," the body plays an indisputable part. While it is part of the content, the somatic also exerts its pressure on the form and becomes the sole organizing principle in the most extreme cases, like *La grande bouffe* (1973, dir. Marco Ferreri) and *Sweet Movie* (1974, dir. Dusan Makavejev). To better understand the body, a detour through Gilles Deleuze's concept of the body-image in *Cinema 2* (1985) is called for. Deleuze is unquestionably the first theorist who includes the body in the regime of cinematic modernism. While his theorization of the body-image still gives more weight to the wandering, tired bodies that first appear in Italian Neorealism and then in the French New Wave, he does hint at more outrageous directions.

The Modernist Body

What is the body on screen? In classical Hollywood, lending its contour in impersonation, the body concretizes and shapes a character through attitudes and gestures. When we see a body on screen, its corporeal existence

23. For a contemporary update on this issue in the New Korean Cinema, see Steve Choe's "Kim Ki-duk's Cinema of Cruelty: Ethics and Spectatorship in the Global Economy," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 15, no. 1 (2007): 65–90.

24. One exception is Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959), which has more to do with his earlier documentary *Night and Fog* (1955) than with *400 Blows* (1959, dir. Francois Truffaut).

is abstracted, abdicating its primacy to narrative forces: a star emerges from the image. Vincent Amiel declares that "dedicating itself to the novelistic material, cinema is tempted, too early, to use the body as a simple vector of the story, abandoning its thickness for the exclusive benefit of its functionality."[25] We would not see pores on the face of a star or hear her bowel movements. Her bodily dimensions are negated to reduce unnecessary distractions for the audience to concentrate on the story. Nobody would want to see Rita Hayworth have diarrhea before performing "Put the Blame on Mame." The body, via the exclusion of biological aspects, performs its function by flattening itself to an image, a signifying unit that anchors our identification within a film. The negation also catalyzes the spectatorial desire for a proper and pure body, self-fulfilling and sealed, bolstered through fetishism.[26] For the audience, it is almost an unreflexive reaction to see bodies as individualized characters, most of which serve as agents. The body vectorizes the plot, giving it momentum to move forward and fueling the desire of the audience. Despite critics' inclination to demote the body to the level of content, the somatization of the plot is the necessary condition of narrative cinema.[27]

Deleuze's theoretical insight pushes this analysis even further. His entire oeuvre on cinema is built on how the body—including the perception-image, the affect-image, and the action-image—constitutes the sensorimotor schema, the narrative impulse of cinema. He expands the body into a whole spectrum of different images, while using its unsaid materiality as the axis of organization. Narrative cinema demands that the body hold together its various motives in the form of a character. Certainly, by way of Baruch Spinoza and Henri Bergson's philosophy, Deleuze attempts to bring in the philosophy of immanence to argue for the autonomy of the image, as a more fundamental unit of cinema and of the world: everything is an image. The image changes, moves, emanates, and receives other images. In this instance, the subject is an obscure image that does not allow the light from other images to pass through freely. But what is this obscurity if not the mysterious body, the sensorimotor schema? What is this sensorimotor schema if not a general, philosophical concept based on how an organism

25. Vincent Amiel, *Le corps au cinéma: Keaton, Bresson, Cassavetes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998), 2.
26. The concept of abject is definitely in operation here, and abjection has a profound relationship with corporeality. See Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
27. Peter Brooks argues that "to know the body by way of a narrative that leads to its specific identity, to give the body specific markings that make it recognizable, and indeed make it a key narrative sign, are large preoccupations of modern narrative" (26). However, the case for literature is different from that of cinema. Literature, on the one hand, has to make visible or palpable the merely indicated. Cinema, on the other, does not. See Peter Brooks's *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 1–27.

perceives, affects, and reacts to external stimulations? In the process, a body (or multiple bodies) is involved. However, Deleuze is not satisfied with the ever-circulating, ever-renewing model of the body. For him, this is the regime of the movement-image. The action-reaction chain does not contribute to thinking.

In *Cinema 2*, he isolates the body-image as the primary site in which thought can be formed. "It is through the body (and no longer through the intermediary of the body) that cinema forms its alliance with the spirit, with thought."[28] To put it rather coarsely, the body should not lead to action, as an intermediary, but to the mental process that Deleuze eagerly wants to distill from modernist cinema.[29] The modernist body diverts action, forming a bypass for stalled circulation. The energy from outside is redirected to the brain, as the title of the chapter syntactically indicates: "Cinema, Body and Brain, Thought." This forestallment is where thinking can work through the weary body, as embodied by Monica Vitti in Michelangelo Antonioni's films, and the ceremonious body, as incarnated by Carmelo Bene himself in his own films. This is the "cinema-body-link."[30] Although the French philosopher details the ways in which the body plays an essential role in cinema, he eventually values *some bodies* over others. Deleuze is more interested in the technicities of the body than the sensual overload that some destructive bodies might incite.[31] His gamut of body-images implicitly rejects the most extreme cases, in which we find sensual and debased bodies, for the reason that they "are not necessarily most successful," not successful enough to make a pathway to thought.[32] This is not surprising, as Alain Badiou points out that the Deleuzian philosophical system has a tendency toward Stoic purification and ascetic sobriety.[33] Nevertheless, Deleuze does pioneer an approach that was previously unseen in the discourse of cinematic modernism. The field of the body-image—and its corporeal avoidance—in Deleuzian taxonomy should be broadened to include other carnal manifestations on screen.[34]

28. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (London: Continuum, 2005), 182.
29. Deleuze's example is Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954). See Deleuze's *Cinema 1*, 201–9.
30. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 183.
31. In other words, for Deleuze, directors like Jean-Luc Godard and Jacques Rivette rightfully belong in this category because their works present "attitudes and postures of the body"—a philosophical tradition that Marcel Mauss first sketched in "Techniques of the Body." This technical aspect—and the sublimation of corporeality—emerges most emphatically in his discussion of Pier Paolo Pasolini in *Cinema 2*: "undoubtedly in all [Pasolini's] work but in particular in *Theorem* and *Salo*, which present themselves as geometrical demonstrations in action" (168). See also Marcel Mauss, "Techniques of the Body," *Economy and Society* 2, no. 1 (1973): 70–88.
32. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 185.
33. Alain Badiou, *The Clamor of Being*, trans. Louise Burchill (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 12.
34. Certainly, Deleuze is quite a *materialist* in the Spinozan sense. In emphasizing his tactical circumvention of some body-images, I hope only to broaden his materialist perspective to make it more corporeal.

Here, I use the term "corporeal cinema" advisedly, to refer to a trend of modernist filmmaking after 1968. At first glance, this periodization might appear arbitrary, but indeed there was a surfeit of brutal experiments on the body at a global scale. Alongside political modernism that completely eliminated the character and its somatic basis, represented by Jean-Luc Godard and abstract formalist filmmakers, a countertrend, edging toward more radical, mindless, and corporeal aesthetics, arrived as a backlash against abstraction.[35] In Europe, Marco Ferreri, Dusan Makavejev, and Pier Paolo Pasolini spearheaded this movement with their tangible provocations. Federico Fellini joined the wave for a while with his *Satyricon* (1969), in which overly carnivalesque and grotesque feasts engulf the space with their primal barbarism. Later, Walerian Borowcyzk's *The Beast* (1975) and Andrej Zulawski's *Possession* (1981) would demonstrate how both male and female bodies are hollowed by the overabundance of sexual excitation. These European directors foreground the body as the terrain for social, political, and cultural forces to regulate and cultivate the corporeal vessel that we tend to ignore; the body has been simplified into a narratological trajectory without any sinews, muscles, or organs. Political modernism negates the sensorimotor schema altogether so that conflicting concepts, images, and texts can collide in a way in which a new thinking pattern can emerge. As opposed to these cerebral attempts, corporeal cinema retains the body, dissecting its narrative function and burrowing into its sensual manifestations. The cinematic somatization, in the latter case, has to be taken literally. It is a strategy to blow up our corporeal participation with the narrative. The body is a parameter that can be modified in terms of its sensual intensity. Seen from this perspective, the emergence of corporeal cinema is not a coincidence but the other half of the picture that is revealed only when we have really learned how to *make sense and sensations*.[36]

Insofar as we have the understanding that cinema can formulate a different corpo-reality and that the *nouvelle vague* model can be bracketed strategically, it becomes easier to see the aesthetic achievements of the Hong Kong New Wave. This aesthetics is understood as a set of carnal inquisitions to which these films subject the audience. In Asia, the corporeal trend was no

35. For a detailed historiographical revisit of this period, see David Rodowick's *The Crisis of Political Modernism: Criticism and Ideology in Contemporary Film Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

36. Corporeal cinema has been active for a long time, e.g., the films of Tod Browning and Luis Bunuel, but it was in the late 1960s that we witnessed an eruption of these films. My approach is also inspired by Linda Williams, Laura U. Marks, and Jennifer Barker, while concentrating more on narratology and stylistics. For a comprehensive theory of tactility in cinema, see Laura U. Marks's *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), and Jennifer Barker's *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009). For the initial formation of the concept of "body genre," see Williams, "Film Bodies."

less robust; an equally intriguing craze over the body was seen in both genre films and auteuristic experiments. From 1967 to 1968, the Japanese studio Shochiku produced a series of slimy horror films that feature an encyclopedia of viscous and invasive matters, including *Goku*, *Body Snatcher from Hell* (1968, Hajime Sato), and *Genocide* (1968, dir. Kazui Nihonmatsu). A more well-known film, *Death by Hanging* (1968, dir. Nagisa Oshima), centers on a Korean death-row prisoner whose body survives the hanging but whose memories have been erased. The film does not build its case on bodily sensations, but it brings the connection between the body and sensorimotor schema to the fore: the body—refusing to "die"—unsettles the surrounding officials and doctors, and it turns the plot into a long-winded resuscitating attempt. The insistence of this body to stay in the image shows its inertia and resistance to Japanese authority. Later in the 1970s, with martial arts and exploitation films, Hong Kong cinema gradually developed its own tradition of corporeal cinema. While the muscular performance of Bruce Lee has been widely discussed as he presents a trans/national gender-inflected example,[37] the lesser-known exploitation films constitute a cult canon that rarely enters scholarly discussions. It is this latter group of films that would directly feed into the Hong Kong New Wave.

In the exploitative tradition, Kuei Chih Hong is most representative with his horror films like *The Killer Snakes* (1974), *Ghost Eyes* (1974), *Hex* (1980), and *The Boxer's Omen* (1983).[38] These films are thrilling and atmospheric with fiercely sensual and sexual excitations. In *The Killer Snakes*, the lonely, traumatized young adult recruits dozens of venomous snakes to terrorize those who have bullied him and to sexually violate female targets. It is as if the protagonist never overcame his childhood trauma—he heard his sadistic mother fornicating with another man. His psychological development is stunted, and the snakes become an extension of his body that enhances his sexual prowess, rendering it both dangerous and arousing. The film, by treating the snakes as a corporeal part of the character, shows us a bigger-than-life version of a downtrodden and powerless man. I have argued that the sensorimotor schema is corporeally constituted, and here both the editing and the slithery and slippery movement of the snakes are the wide-ranging embodiment of the protagonist. He grows into something more than just a figure onscreen, temporarily fusing with the cinematic figuration. Strange sensations and elusive affects that stem from the disintegration of the proper body become yet again a weapon of social critique in the Hong Kong New Wave.

37. See Chris Berry's "Stellar Transit: Bruce Lee's Body, or Chinese Masculinity in a Transnational Frame," in *Embodied Modernities: Corporeality, Representation and Chinese Cultures*, ed. Fran Martin and Larissa Heinrich (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), 218–34.

38. For more information, see Sam Ho and Li Cheuk-to, eds., *Fan jian zhi de xian feng—Gui zhi hong* (Hong Kong: Xiang gang dian ying zi liao guan, 2011).

Although Kuei was still active in filmmaking when Hong Kong cinema was being modernized by a new group of directors, rarely have scholars brought up Kuei's contribution. Lit Fu argues that Kuei and Mou Tun fei are two neglected precursors to the Hong Kong New Wave. Their omission from this history is due to the fact that they were working in the Shaw Brothers studio, an "extremely commercialized icon."[39] This is one explanation, but the other, more dominant factor is the influential model of the *nouvelle vague*; these two directors are famed for their output in horror and soft-core pornography, genres in which the body is of paramount importance. Their corporeal lineage was later reworked with social and political issues of Hong Kong. Even though not recognized by most critics as New Wave directors, Kuei and Mou are still part of the trend.

Carnal Subjectivization

After reassessing the biased critical orientation toward the Hong Kong New Wave in general as well as theorizing the centrality of the body and its disruptive potential in cinema, we are in a better position to reexamine the concrete, material, and corporeal intervention that Hong Kong New Wave directors initiated in a tumultuous period. Here I specifically limit my focus to the manifestation of the body with regard to the formation of an identity, an issue that is of particular interest for these Hong Kong directors.[40] In his influential *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (1997), Ackbar Abbas evaluates the movement: "The New Hong Kong cinema deserves attention because it has finally found a worthy subject—it has found Hong Kong itself as a subject."[41] Here, Hong Kong is understood more as a spatial entity that stages its own spectral history by affective techniques of disappearance in urban space; Hong Kong is transient, rootless, and always in crisis because of its colonial history and the nonexistence of its precolonial history. This cultural politics that operates on disappearance needs to be mediated and negotiated by another form of volatility, that is, cinema. The New Hong Kong cinema, for Abbas, did not emerge until 1982, "the year of Margaret Thatcher's visit to China."[42] I do not intend to challenge Abbas's masterful interpretation of Stanley Kwan's and Wong Kar-Wai's films that single-handedly determined the direction of academic discourse around

39. See Lit Fu's "Xiang gang dian ying xin lang chao shi gao," in *Zhong guo dian ying nian jian: zhong guo dian ying bai nian te kan*, ed. Yu Xiao Yi (Beijing: Zhong guo dian ying nian jian she, 2005), 700–711.
40. There are still other possibilities to re/present the body: its symbiosis with technology and media (Cronenberg), its precarious socioeconomic position (Dardenne brothers), etc.
41. Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 23.
42. Abbas, *Hong Kong*, 16.

Hong Kong culture, since his approach is more than sophisticated enough to see the limitations of the *nouvelle vague*, inventing his own concepts to speculate on Hong Kong's own cultural anxiety.[43] However, his periodization is rather intriguing, for it ignores the productive initial years (1979–1982) of the movement. Perhaps the trope of disappearance is unable to take in the corpo-reality of the first three years, since the latter is never subtle, pneumatic, or immaterial. Take Mr. Hong Kong in *The Imp* as an example. Hong Kong here is fully materialized and sensualized with a body, not a specter that haunts the urban space in *Rouge* (1988, dir. Stanley Kwan). The formula proposed by Abbas can be thusly rewritten: the Hong Kong New Wave has found Hong Kong itself as a corporeal subject.

For Abbas, Thatcher's visit marks an unmistaken turning point in Hong Kong cinema—a symbolic sojourn that points to the fated reintegration of Hong Kong. The transition itself prompts questions about Hong Kong identities, cultures, spaces, and their subsequent spectralization. But if we look back, the uncertainty pertaining to the seemingly undecided future of Hong Kong prior to 1982 also brings about an unforeseen corporeal dimension. The year was 1979. Under the table, the British and Chinese governments were already in contact to determine the destiny of Hong Kong and its uncertain political future. Governor of Hong Kong at the time, Murray MacLehose, took a trip to Beijing, exploring the possibility of a lease extension, eventually frustrated by the hard-line stance of China. Set against the British government and Chinese "motherland," the formation of a Hong Kong identity faced political uncertainties that rendered itself incapacitated.[44] Stripped of any political agency, the struggle to form a subject becomes almost impossible. This immobilized state surfaces in the re/presentation of the body in the Hong Kong New Wave in the form of a dead-end narrative.

Yim Ho's *The Happening* is exemplary of this pessimistic tone in its depiction of a group of clueless and frivolous adolescents who, in the end, die miserably one by one when pursued by the police. But when the characters are stranded in one place or another, the narrative tends to shift its focus from the speedy chase to base corporeal sensations, like disgust, pain, and irritation. In one climatic scene, the reckless youths decide to fuel up at a gas station without paying. The gas station clerk is then accidentally stabbed to death by a fork in the neck, and the blood gushing out on the floor gradually closes in on the characters. The sticky, thick bodily fluid somatizes on screen a social situation in which the characters are stuck. For these young people, the social reality is felt via their engagement with corporeal sensations, and the audience is also interpellated by the narrative to understand them through violent and disintegrating bodies.

43. Abbas, *Hong Kong*, 20.
44. Yingchi Chu, *Hong Kong Cinema: Coloniser, Motherland and Self* (London: Routledge, 2003), 42–62.

In Deleuzian terms, this is one consequence in the wake of the dissolution of the sensorimotor schema. When the narrative is forced into a dead end, it turns to the corporeal vessels of characters on screen, struggling to cut into the somatic basis of an identity and its dispositions toward certain actions. The body, in turn, pressurizes the narrative. The plethoric body thus becomes an explosive punctuation in the narrative advancement. In her first film, *The Secret*, Ann Hui surgically inserts several corporeal sequences as the crux of the mystery. In one scene, the camera shows how the autopsy is conducted; fingerprints are taken, the bodies cleaned, and the chest cut open. Identities are obscured and hidden in the heaviness of the body, and the corporeal vessel, while not immediately obvious, is still the only way to find sure answers. Later in the film, our female protagonist, Ah Ming (Sylvia Chang), finds out the dead woman's pregnancy was not included in the autopsy report. She pieces the clues together to reveal that her supposedly dead friend is still alive and expecting. In the final confrontation, the baby was extracted—an image we do not see but imagine when the machete falls on the belly. In her films, Hui chooses to bring in the corporeal element strategically so that they become the hidden matrix of meaning in searching for this Hong Kong baby that needs to be forcefully removed from her mother's uterus. More generally, in the Hong Kong New Wave, no birth is ever happy, as we have already seen in *The Imp*. It is a painful, sensual, and profoundly corporeal event.

The same can be said about illegal immigrants, whether they are from Vietnam or China. The trip to Hong Kong is rife with threats and extortions. Even when they reach the shore safely, numerous crime syndicates await to hold them as merchandise to be sold back to their families in China or brothels in Hong Kong. Mou's *Lost Souls* (1980) tells this journey in a scandalous way. The story unfolds through migrant smugglers' torture, abuse, and mutilation of the illegal immigrants, whose Cantonese nickname literally means "man-snake." The film is said to be reminiscent of Pasolini's *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975), but in Mou's film the gritty corpo-reality intermingles with lived experiences of illegal immigrants, whereas Pasolini disengages from a more immediate social and political context to focus more on spectatorial complicity.[45] These people without identities have to go through a series of corporeal trials to reinvent themselves. For the most part, the narrative does not instigate any action that might change the situation. Instead, humiliated bodies appear and reappear. Cries and screams are heard and overheard. Immolation and brutality take place over and again. When these immigrants finally escape, they realize Hong Kong is not the paradise they had imagined. Other more "mobile" immigrants have likewise

45. For the most in-depth analysis of *Salò*, see Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit's "Merde Alors," *October* 13 (Summer 1980): 23–35.

become disillusioned. In *Long Arm of the Law* (1984, dir. Johnny Mak), four Chinese fugitives enter Hong Kong for a heist, ending up slaughtered in an attic along with rats—an animal metaphor coming from *Dangerous Encounter—First Kind*.[46]

Rooted in this tradition, Tsui Hark's *We Are Going to Eat You!* is even more allegorical and radical. It directly deals with cannibalism that the great Chinese writer Lu Xun narrates in *A Madman's Diary* (1918), in which the madman sees the words "Eat People" in between the lines in all Chinese classics. Tsui literalizes this paranoia and sets the film in a cannibalistic village. Here, the body becomes the impulse of the narrative, since the villagers are impelled to hunt humans to assuage their hunger. Human phagomania is both an allegory and an onscreen carnal spectacle. This is Hong Kong's microcosm—everyone devours each other for profit. Another interpretation is to see passersby as immigrants (like *Lost Souls*) or even Hong Kong people themselves, dismembered and maimed by cultural, political, and economic exigencies. Meanwhile, Tsui is not afraid of making us see all the bloody carnage of how men and women are sawn, split open, pulled apart, and pierced with innards exposed. This is juxtaposed to the deadly kung fu of the protagonist, as if the moral is "he who has mobility should not be consumed." Unthinking but purposeful, these grotesque scenes constantly come back to the question of the body to cut through both the fantastic genre conventions as well as the disembodied and intellectual model.

Inspired by all the films above with their animalistic cannibalism and corporeal landscape, Leung Po-chih's *The Island* (1985) is a distinctly self-conscious attempt to wed these wild imaginations in the post-1984 era. Three mentally deranged brothers—whose only goal is to find a woman to give birth to a baby so their family blood can flow on—live on the island. They kidnap a Chinese illegal immigrant only to find out she is impure, that is, not a virgin. Fortunately, a group of students along with their teacher come to the distant island for camping, making them the perfect targets. A grisly hide-and-seek then follows, with snakes and sea urchins as well as dead chickens and halved earthworms. Punctured bodies, physical proximity, and spooky camera movements are mingled to make our skin crawl. What situates this film in context is a radio broadcast that the audience overhears in the teacher's apartment, reporting on how the British and the Chinese are deliberating on the Hong Kong matter. This piece of information facilitates the massacre on the island: before the return to China (the two governments signed the joint declaration in 1984 that Hong Kong would be returned in 1997), it is more urgent than ever to have an authentic "island" baby, just

46. The original title of *The Beasts* (1980), Dennis Yu's other New Wave film, can be literally translated as "mountain dogs." In these films, animality denotes a state between a proper subject and some organic assemblage.

not with the Chinese bums; however, the irony lies in the fact that the three brothers still insist on a traditional Chinese conjugal ceremony.

The moral is clear: flanked by the British and the Chinese, the process of Hong Kong subjectivization is ingrained in corpo-reality, always ugly and cruel, heavy with blood and flesh. In this case, this corpo-reality reframes the imagination of an incipient Hong Kong identity and the racial separation of Vietnamese and Chinese immigrants in Hong Kong society; it opens up carnal commonalities for us to see the potential dissolution and recombination of bodies and identities. Locals and immigrants are equally on trial in the grueling process to reinvent themselves.

Corpo-reality

What is the body on screen? Is it a figure in the image? An organizing force of the narrative? An image to anchor our identification? An interface that excites and disgusts the audience? An associative principle based on the biological needs of an organism? Needless to say by now, all of above are parts of what the body is in cinema. The Hong Kong New Wave demonstrates precisely this suppressed dimension through a bloody subjectivization, informed by its own embeddedness of Hong Kong's political economy. At the beginning of this chapter, I approached *Dangerous Encounter—First Kind* with some puzzlement because of its corporeal dimension. Now, its import is more distinct and unmistakable. To understand these Hong Kong New Wave films, the corpo-reality they present is a core facet, often suppressed by the discursive influences of the French New Wave. This aesthetics is a somatization of social and political issues. It forbids us to watch from afar. It invites us to experience before we can make a judgment. If there is a "realistic" aesthetics in the Hong Kong New Wave, it has to include not only films by Allen Fong (*Father and Son* [1981], *Ah Ying* [1982]), which are closer to the Italian Neorealist canon, but also all these films that dare to thematize various bodies in a different modernist pursuit. The Hong Kong New Wave precipitates this carnal mediation. The body is never only a visible sign or a negligible substrate for the formation of an identity.[47] Any inscription of social forces on our identity is experienced corporeally. This is indeed why we need to dwell on the body more scrupulously before we can proceed to discern its meaning. From the 1990s onward, the issue of the body appears increasingly urgent in the global development of cinema, from Takeshi Kitano to the New

47. Olivia Khoo, "Hong Kong Cinema's Exotic Others: Re-examining the Hong Kong Body in the Context of Asian Regionalism," in *A Companion to Hong Kong Cinema*, ed. Esther M. K. Cheung, Gina Marchetti, and Esther C. M. Yau (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 123.

Korean Cinema or from Pasolini to the French New Extremity.[48] When critics praise these aesthetic novelties, it seems more pressing than ever to reclaim these fleshy vestiges from Hong Kong. If the Hong Kong New Wave and its corpo-reality have any genuine cultural valance, it is to ask us to immerse in bodily figurations, corporeal connections, and carnal punctuations before we let our reason fend off and sublimate all the uncomfortable sensations of which these films remind us.

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48. For more examples, see Tim Palmer's *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), and Asbjørn Grønstad's *Screening the Unwatchable: Spaces of Negation in Post-millennial Art Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

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