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action and transnational cinema

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*Hong Kong Connections: Transnational
Imagination in Action Cinema*

Duke University Press, Durham and
London, 2005

ISBN 1932643192

RRP US\$23.95 (pb)

In the penultimate scene of Jim Jarmusch's gansta/samurai/gangster film *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (1999), the showdown between Louis, an aging Italian American gangster (played by John Tormey), and Ghost Dog, his assassin retainer, now mortal enemy (played by Forest Whitaker), is interrupted by philosophical reflection. Ghost Dog has stressed all along that a retainer will never kill his Master and so we know that this is not a showdown, even though it appears like a classic Western face-off. Instead of shooting Ghost Dog speaks of the demise of two ancient tribes, the gangster and the samurai (and perhaps of two kinds of action film). Louis shoots. But Ghost Dog's musings prove premature as the final scene splits between a young Jamaican-American girl reading the copy of *Hagakure* given to her as a gift by Ghost Dog, and a young Italian-American woman and reader of *Rashomon* who assumes the role of godmother to a mafioso family wiped out by Ghost Dog. The final scene then reveals an after-life that may be the space of the whole film.

In his essay 'The Way of the Samurai: *Ghost Dog*, Mishima, and Modernity's *Other*', Ryoko Otomo criticises Jarmusch's rendering of the *Hagakure* as an ancient, or ancestral, text, pointing out that *Hagakure* is in fact a literary response to the modernisation of Japanese society. *The Book of Hagakure*, Otomo remonstrates,

was written by Yamamoto Tsunetomo (Jocho) in the early eighteenth century, more than a hundred years after the Tokugawa government established a centralised power, using Confucian ideology

to legitimate the position of the samurai at the top of the social hierarchy. By the time the *Hagakure* was written, the development of urban centres and the subsequent accumulation of merchant wealth had begun to force the samurai class to reinvent themselves to stay in power.¹ (31–43)

In the film, the ambivalence of Tsunetomo's literary account of an 'ancient tribe' is elided in favour of a cliché about the samurai as an actor in an ancient tradition dictated by loyalty and discipline, and in which action is itself determined by a code of a priori death. From this perspective Ghost Dog's serenity, his composure, his efficacy, his stealth all derive from his idea of himself as already dead. Although Otomo's comment reiterates some of the dangers of generic and cultural appropriation, it is difficult to ignore what Jarmusch's film does to the 'tradition' of American action film. Jarmusch's 'ancestralisation' of action must be seen from two different perspectives at the same time: first, *Ghost Dog* (1999) extends the process of ancestralisation initiated in *Dead Man* (1995), so that the very term 'ancestral' acquires indigenous and orientalist dimensions (the term 'stupid fucken white man' is uttered in each film by the same actor [Gary Farmer] and the same character, Nobody). Second, the temporal structure of action—its basic systems of montage—is transformed from *Dead Man* to *Ghost Dog*, the only films in which Jarmusch employs alternating and convergent montage: rigid (disciplined perhaps) in the latter, and loose (wandering) in the former, and from the gangster/gangsta film to the samurai film. The

uneasy inter-cutting of each into the other is evinced in the very moment of alternation, when we see Louis in frame for the first time standing outside the Chinese restaurant thinking about the implications of 'whacking' Handsome Frank, and in voice-over we hear Ghost Dog say, 'It is bad when one thing becomes two', thereby sounding the arrival of the war between the retainer and his master, Jarmusch's own ambivalence concerning action, and the aesthetic problem of nationalist and transnationalist cinema.

Action is a modern concept; it is about discontinuity and decodification, a movement of change from moment to moment. In *Ghost Dog* (1999), ancestry is continuity out-of-place, the gangsters rent a room out the back of a Chinese restaurant and Ghost Dog lives in a pigeon coop atop an apartment building. It is also contradictory: the gangsters are being eclipsed by young black gangstas with an investment in 'Asian' concepts of action—as if Jarmusch is himself foregrounding the very process of the transnationalisation of cinema. But from within the transnationalist perspective, the 'arrival' of ancestry also brings with it a measure of aesthetic continuity. The modern needs the discontinuity of action and the continuity of the ancient in order to found itself, but depending on your perspective these relations mean different things. For instance, Benedict Anderson's imaginary nation (so often evoked in national cinema debates) requires both the continuity of death (the unknown soldier) and the discontinuity of action (the nation as founded territorial space) to establish for itself a contradictory temporality of a finite past and an infinite present, as

if the past were ceaselessly distending into the present, pressing it into the future. But Anderson's imaginary form relies on schisms in Christian thought regarding the relation of an eternal present (that belongs to Catholicism) and a simultaneous present (that belongs to various Protestantisms), as if Jarmusch's ambivalence concerning alternation of action and therefore its constitution of simultaneous transversal time evokes the same problem but in different terms. All action in *Ghost Dog* is already written 'in the words of the ancients'. Action is written before it is embodied.

These observations about a transnational American film derive from my own attempt to consider the implications for our present understanding of the concept of action in cinema of *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema* edited by Meaghan Morris, Siu Leung Li and Stephen Chan Ching-kiu and jointly published by Duke University Press and Hong Kong University Press. As I read this book, Jarmusch's introduction of 'the words of the ancients' into action cinema became more and more compelling and strange, as if *Ghost Dog* were himself a spectre rising out of the book, an instance at once of Jarmusch's continuous defamiliarisation of American cinema and culture and an example of the transnationalisation of action. (One thing *Ghost Dog* does is delve into a particular instance of African American Asianism, featuring as it does the aforementioned literary texts and rap artists such as The Wu Tang Clan and RZA.)

One of the advantages of a book such as *Hong Kong Connections* is that the action film becomes less (and less) synonymous with

American film, with national cinema, and the geo-politics to which national cinema studies often subscribe. If national cinema studies are fixated on a geo-politics that places Los Angeles at the centre and all other territories within its orbit, then *Hong Kong Connections* decisively shifts the centre of gravity away from Los Angeles, and only includes Los Angeles as the site for a dance between an African American cop and a Chinese cop. In this context *Rush Hour* re-orientates the very history of American cinema, and displaces the clansmen's conception of the organism. Hong Kong does not simply emerge as an alternative centre of gravity. How could it? We may even be talking already of Seoul in the present tense and of Hong Kong in the past tense. Rather, Hong Kong emerges as a point of connection, contact, and passage. Hong Kong cannot be seen in the same geo-political terms as Los Angeles—*transnationalisation affects the territoriality of action*. Hong Kong is pivotal but it is also decolonised and/or recolonised (depending on your perspective). Korea is freed from Japan but is split along ideological lines. China is communist and capitalist. The USA, France and Australia are marginal. Curiously, Taiwan seems to be absent altogether—perhaps its territorial uncertainties prevent it from making action films. Action montage cannot maintain polarities as it did, nor can it present the same sensory-motor regularities. Adrian Martin's account of *Mad Max* (1979) and Nicole Brenez's account of the French avant-garde take on Hong Kong action make this shift abundantly clear. Martin talks of a head-on collision of screen and spectatorial space that is decidedly in-organic:

Mad Max's tactic is to inexorably nudge us from side views of the road, then closer and closer to its centre ... then lower and lower down, towards the bitumen. This prepares us, again and again, for the climactic apocalypse: the absolutely primal moments of cinema where two absolutely separated visual fields ... face each other, starkly, in order to cancel each other out in the short circuit shock of a head-on collision. It must be emphasised how rare this face-off of fields is in narrative cinema. (181)

As a cyclist who recently collided with the bitumen I can attest to the primal shock that such events engender. Both these accounts of action stand on what might be called a boundless edge. Think of the place of Hong Kong cinema in Olivier Assayas's *Irma Vep* (1996), where one of the foundation myths of French cinema is re-figured through Maggie Cheung. Assayas's *Demonlover* (2002) has French film entrepreneurs in competition with American entrepreneurs for the rights to distribute Japanese animation—it is as if trans-nationalisation affects the history of cinema. Think of how Hou Hsiao Hsien's *Café Lumière* (2003) de-delineates the train journey.

Hong Kong Connections reveals a similar territorial disequilibrium within contemporary transnational Asian cinemas. An implicit, though compelling aspect of *Hong Kong Connections* is that transnational action is, at present, deterritorial. That is, if national cinema conceptualises an Andersonian space that is homogeneous and a time that is transversal then transnational cinema conceptualises a space

that is heterogeneous and a time that is vertical. This formulation may apply only to the range of films discussed here but there is a sense of resurrection and excavation of an ancestral world that is not comfortable with modernity—suggesting that Ryoko Otomo's critique of Jarmusch may have valency elsewhere as well. A number of essays reveal a milieu of action that derives from a once buried imaginary, as if action were itself located in an imaginary territory, not the here and now of the sensory-motor response of American cinema. The most immediate sign of the imaginary-ness of action is that it often emerges out of a pre-modern era that somehow continues to bear significant relation to the political and cultural situation of the present—the action often retrieves or excavates this past, as if the active body were immersed in a ghostly idea. This ambivalence regarding the historicity of action is worth further investigation, as if tradition were itself a real question for Asian transnational cinema.

The fraught relation of action cinema and modernity traced in a number of the essays is nevertheless interesting as it allows us to distinguish between action cinema defined either within American cinema, or the action cinema rejected by post-war European cinema. If American action cinema is about the coming to the present of civilisation and if the European critique of action is about the end of civilisation, and the beginning of mourning, of the after-life of thought and culture, then 'Asian' action is about the possible reinvention of a relation between the body and time. Kim Soyoun's concept of 'hwal' as vitality as opposed to power (taken from Cho Jeonghwan) points towards a

very different concept of the relation of a body to its milieu:

Vitality is the form of energy directed against authority: 'It is not non-violence that fights against power, but vitality. Vitality is not the opposing power but the anti-power. It is not centripetal but centrifugal power. (110)

To me, defining action as vitality requires not only a certain order of point of view but importantly also a form of montage that cannot be integrated into the various organisms of classical (read pre-World War II) nationalist cinemas of USA, France, Soviet Union or Germany, or of the modern nationalist cinemas. An adequate concept of contemporary action cinema cannot disregard the ways in which Asian cinemas have been attempting to create active cinematic bodies. The desire or necessity to reinvent the action-oriented body from a pre-modern, or ambivalently modern, body has ramifications for the notion of spontaneity (spontaneity is often the sudden and unforeseen eruption of action, as if the action always resided in the real and not the Imaginary, hence its danger to philosophers, theorists, etc). Other concepts of action to consider include 'guzhuang baishi pian' (classical-costumed tales of anecdotal history) in Dai Jinhua 'Order/Anti-Order: Representation of Identity in Hong Kong Action Movies', and *wuxia pian* from Stephen Chan Ching-kiu's 'The Fighting Condition in Hong Kong cinema'.

The 'anachronistic' quality of action, its disturbance of traditional lineage, its immersion of

the modern present in the various pre-modern agricultural, feudal (warrior) pasts, points to an ancestralisation of action that paradoxically opens bodies to other powers, capacities and combinations. Valentina Vitali's essay 'Martial Art in the Hindi Action Cinema' demonstrates that the Hindi action body is interested in some energies and not others:

Modern Hindi action heroes occasionally mix choreographed acrobatics and physical bulk, where acrobatics borrow both from indigenous fighting techniques, such as wrestling (*Zanjeer*, *Ghatak*, *Raj Kumar Santoshi* 1996, *Ziddi*, *Gaddu Dhanoa* 1997), and from (Indian ideas of) 'kung fu' (*Sholay*, *Deewar*, *Collie*). Some films may pay lip service to the display of muscles (*Khalnayak*, *Subashi Ghai* 1993) but never do muscles and a sense of pure physical strain take priority over acrobatics. The Hindi action body is, on the whole, a body oblivious of sheer physical energy and of modern technology as a means of enhancing it. Instead, what appears to be envisaged is an ideal 'acrobaticity', the choreography of which presents physical mastery and equilibrium as acquired modern techniques. (149)

Laleen Jayamanne's essay 'Let's Miscegenate: Jackie Chan and his African American Connection' shows how gesture itself is trans-territorial, subject to different comedic and dramatic 'crossings'. Though there is evidently a preference for the silent gesture that tends to scramble Tucker's verbal gestures as 'chatter'. Chan's initial silence in *Rush Hour* somehow 'echoes'

Chaplin's refusal to engage with sound until he is ready, as if Tucker is himself inadvertently shuffled into a mode of cinematic talk that is supplementary to and in danger of obscuring gesture's subtle interplay with silence, the face, the stance, the walk, etc:

The comic gag of the three-way stand-off between Tucker, Chan and a white American cabby played by Gene LeBell (also known as Gene 'Judo' LeBell) is, while comically unpredictable, also a lovely set piece reprising the John Woo move from *The Killer* taken up by Tarantino. As Chan gets his partner out of this deadlock the hitherto silent Chan comes up with a beautiful speech which knocks Tucker off his guard and yet he is game enough to appreciate it, so that he starts mockingly imitating Chan's flawless English speech, adding gestures to it, as they get into his car and drive off. (158)

Tucker is a 'chattering mouth' while Chan speaks beautifully out of silence as if the ghost of Chaplin was animating this critical figuration. Even when we are asked to 'listen' to Ralph Ellison's analysis of 'What America Would be Without Blacks'—which is packed with Tucker-like mannerisms such as 'sudden turns', 'shocks', 'swift changes of pace', which are themselves observed—the attention subtly shifts from Tucker to what he has to offer Chan, and to Chan's necessary internalisation of some non-negotiable gestures.

One of the conclusions to be drawn from a book such as this is that action is a concept

undergoing redefinition. The fact that it is here redefined in transnational terms means that there are multiple forms of action, and many different orders of action. Ancestralisation may prove to be a transitory form of action but it does at least reveal other possibilities and other temporalities hitherto denied to the action cinema. The concept of action has suffered in film and cultural theory from its association with sameness, with totalisation, with masculinisation and with the idea of the American Way. This is clearly a problem of theory and not of practice. The plethora of concepts of action presented in *Hong Kong Connections* shows that *the way* is indeterminate.

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1. Otomo Ryoko, "The Way of the Samurai", *Ghost Dog, Mishima, and Modernity's Other*, *Japanese Studies*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2001, pp. 31–43.