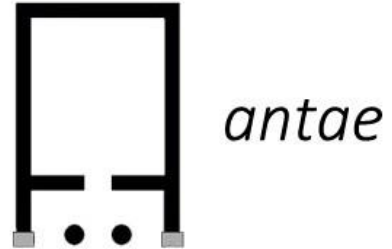


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Hong Kong's Cinema of Cruelty: Visceral Visuality in *Drug War*

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Introduction

This paper argues that repulsive images of the violated internal body can function as political resistance in visual terms. By examining the visceral viscosity in Johnny To's action film *Drug War*, this study illustrates how in film, the internal body may be understood as aesthetically resisting, with involuntary bodily responses, both China's socialist judiciary and Hong Kong's capitalist economy within the city's "One Country, Two Systems" constitutional principle, a paradoxical ideology implemented after the 1997 transfer of sovereignty from the United Kingdom to the People's Republic of China (PRC). Apart from serving as audiovisual representations of violated human bodies, repulsive visceral images also function as the cinema's aesthetic responses to the current paradoxical political ideology.

Based on the case study of *Drug War* (2012), this paper discovers that when a forcefully imposed political ideology becomes too contradictory and nonsensical for the people to accept, common narrative strategies, such as realism and political allegory, will no longer suffice for political expressions in film. In turn, visceral images of disgust may appear as rationally uncontrolled reflections of social reality, projecting a lack of comprehensibility and common sense. In the case of *Drug War*, these reflections are characterised by onscreen involuntary bodily responses—hyperventilating, defecating—showcasing a multi-sensorial and visceral kind of corporeal logic. With these images of involuntary bodily responses, the cinema virtually becomes a disembodied extension of an abject body—a disgusted body of a disturbed, disenfranchised people. With reference to the cinematographic philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, the theory of "gest" by Bertolt Brecht, Antonin Artaud's theatrical language of the Theatre of Cruelty, the neo-Lacanian film theory of Fabio Vighi, and the theories of social and psychological abjections by George Bataille and Julie Kristeva, this essay observes how, in some cases, visceral viscosity could positively recognise the political abject's personhood and reconfigure the abject's political identity.

One assumption this essay's thesis hinges on is that *Drug War*'s political expressions must be understood in film aesthetic terms because of the film's subjection to China's censorship system. Although Hong Kong has geopolitically been a part of the PRC since 1997, Johnnie To, a prolific director, had not started working on any Mainland Chinese–Hong Kong co-produced films until 2010.¹ *Drug War* was his first film that was completely financed by, censored by, and distributed

¹ Nga Syun Wong, 王雅隽, '(Duqifeng Zhuanfang 2) Zhengzhi lingjia yiqie, canyu Zhonggang hepaipian yushang kongqian de maodun' 【杜琪峰專訪2】政治凌駕一切, 參與中港合拍片遇上空前的矛盾 ('Politics overpowers everything: serious paradoxes met in China–Hong Kong co-productions' [Interview with Johnnie To #2]), *Hong Kong 01*, 3 August 2016. <[Zhengzhi lingjia...](#)> [accessed 1 December 2019].

in the PRC. This means that, unlike To's previous, minimally-censored filmmaking experience in Hong Kong, the rules of the game would have to change for *Drug War*. The film had to retain To's already well-defined auteur style, but it also had to pass the evaluations of the PRC's State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) in order to be screened in theaters in Mainland China nationwide. Therefore, the film had to be politically correct, that is, police characters must be positive: righteous, fearless, honourable, self-sacrificing, good-cop archetypes. This predicament limited To's signature style of creating (Hong Kong) police characters fighting moral dilemmas, such as in *Running Out of Time* (1999), *Mad Detective* (2007), and *Trivisa* (2016). Instead, *Drug War's* diegesis is in Mainland China. All of its positive characters are Mainland Chinese, while all the villains are from Hong Kong.

Consequently, under those censorship conditions, an unusual (anti-)aesthetic of disgust appears in *Drug War* when traditional logic of the cognitive fails, and the inner body takes over.² Since, in a culture of censorship, rationality and reason must recede, the viscera symptomatically form a political landscape—a site of battle between politico-economic subjugation and individual personhood—responding through the screen to Hong Kong's paradoxical political position as well as demonstrating a haptic type of political image.

In this kind of cinematic space of flesh, the viscera function as an extension of a politically deprived figure: an abject, so to speak, which is a disgusted and violated body without any personhood. The images of these viscera's involuntary bodily responses display different dimensions and layers of the body—the epidermis, skeletal muscles, internal organs, and so on—that offer a critical response to a failing paradoxical political ideology that appears nonsensical.

Visceral visuality in *Drug War*

Drug War is about a fearless and self-sacrificing Mainland anti-drug squad in Jinhai (a fictional Chinese city) capturing a group of drug criminals from Hong Kong.³ The plot revolves around the collaboration and fallout between two main characters: the hero, Captain Zhang Lei (played by Sun Honglei), and the villain, Timmy Choi (played by Louis Koo). Captain Zhang is the leader of Jinhai's anti-drug squad. Timmy is a drug criminal from Hong Kong. The film begins with Captain Zhang on a mission to capture a group of drug mules. When he takes them to the hospital to force them to eliminate the drugs they are smuggling in their bodies, he runs into Timmy, who is coincidentally being treated there for an injury resulting from an explosion in his meth factory. After a chase in the hospital, Captain Zhang captures Timmy and, facing the PRC's death penalty, Timmy offers Captain Zhang his networking ability to lure other criminals in a pan-East-Asian drug ring to the authorities. With Timmy's help, Captain Zhang captures and impersonates a

² By "cognitive", I refer to brain functions related to mental activities, such as thinking, learning, and memory. See Sam Wang, *The Neuroscience of Everyday* (Chantilly: The Great Courses, 2010), p. 21.

³ *Drug War*, dir. by Johnnie To (Media Asia Distribution: 2012).

Mainland drug dealer, Bro Haha, in order to further the capture of a drug gang from Hong Kong, the Gang of Seven, comprising Timmy's family and friends. During the process, Captain Zhang almost dies from overdosing on cocaine in order to show Li Shucheng, a messenger from the Gang of Seven, that he is serious. Because Timmy plans on escaping, however, he saves Captain Zhang through his experience with drugs. On his failed attempt to escape, Timmy causes the deaths of the entire Gang of Seven, Captain Zhang, and many Chinese police officers. He eventually receives the death penalty in Mainland China by lethal injection—without extradition, because he is a Hong Kong citizen.

Aesthetically speaking, *Drug War* exhibits a strong visual interest in disgust with images of the interior of the body—skeletal muscular movements, gag reflexes, gastrointestinal reflexes. I argue that these images of involuntary bodily responses—typically images of instinctive reactions to external intrusions or aggravations—function as haptic signs, evoking a potential for political resistance. Anatomically, the external body is often the first site of control in coercive situations: when resisting the state, it is typically the primary space of control where the individuals' ideologies or thoughts conflict with those of the state's, such as in the cases of arrest, imprisonment, torture, rape, and so on. Relatively speaking, the inner body is a less spatially occupied site of control, except when it comes to the victim's complete death, such as in executions by beheading, evisceration, or the dismemberment of the body.⁴ However, in *Drug War*, the interior of the body takes over as a site of battle between politico-economic subjugation and individual personhood. The inner body exhibits a wholly different type of resistance to the official paradoxical/nonsensical political ideology, harboring a different epistemology of politico-economic power and intuitively reacting to state coercion and economic control beyond the cognitive.

Drug War's cinematographic interest in the intruded inner body is unusual for both the Western and Chinese ideas about the body in general. In a Western sense, the body is often considered personal, as in libertarian thinking that '[t]hrough the earth, and all inferior creatures, be common to all men, yet every man has a property in his own person: this no body has any right to but himself. The labour of his body, and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his'.⁵ The state or an employer may determine some natures of a body, such as often observed in neoliberal contexts, but, with the exception of slavery, it is rare in modern days to consider one's body as an entirely state-owned property or individually owned chattel. From a Confucian perspective, the body is considered a precious parental gift, a private and familial asset.

⁴ For an example of visceral images associated with complete deaths in Taiwan's indigenous context, refer to Jih-Fei Cheng, 'Visceral Violence and Archives of Indigenous Survivance in Warriors of the Rainbow: *Seediq Bale* (2011)', *The Paradox of Intimate Labor in Transpacific Film and Media Cultures*, SCMS Conference, Fairmont Millennium Park, Chicago. 23 March 2017, presentation.

⁵ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. by Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), pp. 287–88.

Nevertheless, the visceral visuality in *Drug War* shows the body as both a state-owned property and a reified commodity in post-socialist Chinese judicial culture, which submits to the state's and the capital's unconditional rights to trespass and traverse itself. In an exploitative politico-economic situation like this, the inner body becomes a platform to visually demonstrate a corporeal kind of political struggle.

Before continuing, I will first cite two examples from *Drug War* of images relating to defecating and hyperventilating, and explain how the body is disturbed, violated, and executed in cases of state coercion and late capitalist reification accordingly. In these examples, the unusually graphic anatomic depictions of violating the body, including x-ray, enema, and lethal injection, strongly reveal an (anti-)aesthetic interest in the intrusion of alien objects in the body.

Drug War contains multiple scenes with the Jinhai police's anti-drug squad cracking down on crime. In one of the scenes, the audience sees the lead mule, Li Guangcheng (played by Yin Zhusheng), being administered an enema in a bed after being caught by the police. This shot is completely silent, except for the frail diegetic sound of Li Guangcheng's breathing. In the next shot, the camera pans away from a close-up of Li Guangcheng's colon x-ray, across a group of doctors and police officers, and tilts to Captain Zhang, who is squatting down and eliminating the pods in his body behind a partitioning curtain. Next, we see a young female drug mule squatting down on the floor under police surveillance, trying to defecate the pods inside of her (Figure 1). We then hear the sound of running tap water and see a close-up of about 25 pods in a sink (Figure 2). With a straight face, Captain Zhang uses a pair of tongs to wash off the feces and place the pods in a tray.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Visually speaking, these scatological images in *Drug War* are undoubtedly uncommon in To's cinema. Although To's other action movies feature plenty of bloody fight scenes, repulsive subject matter is often downplayed. It even comes as a surprise to longtime To viewers like David Bordwell, who describes one part as '[t]he grubby scene of drug mules groaning as they shit out plastic pods of dope'.⁶

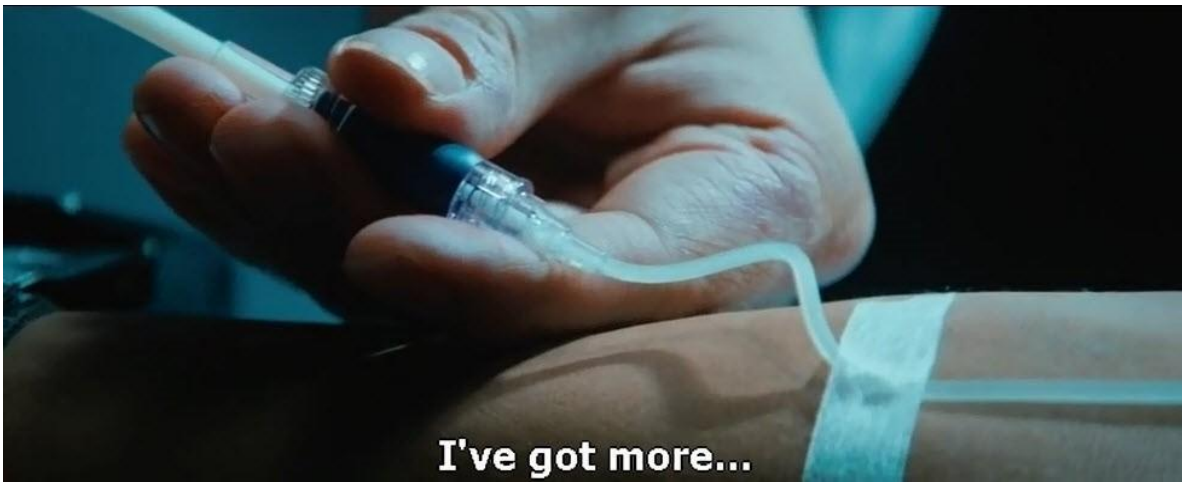
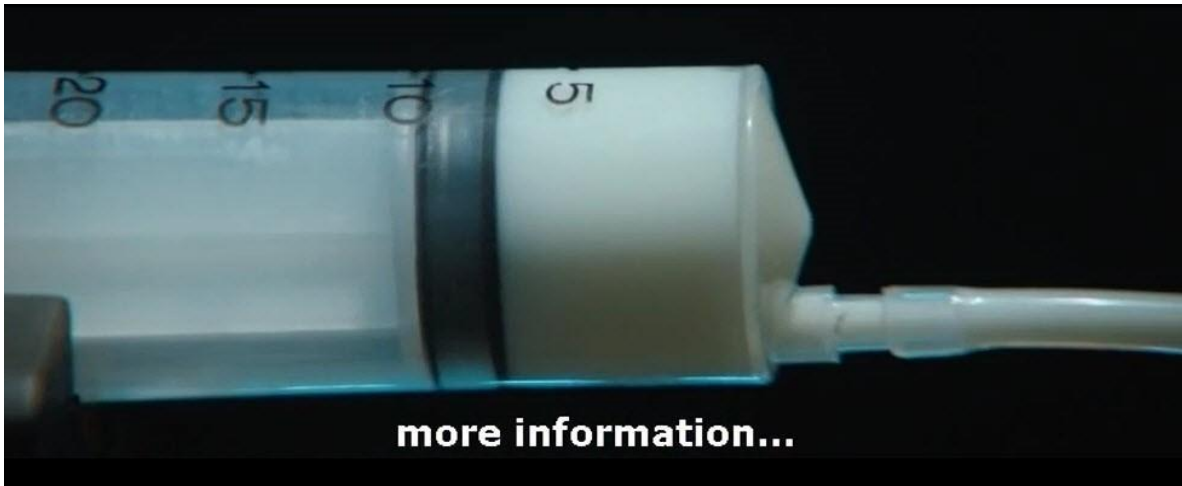
Beside defecation, hyperventilation may also be read as a sign of the body straining against state coercion. In the film's final shootout, we hear the off-screen voice of a judge announcing Timmy's death sentence as we watch the aftermath of his failed escape: the lifeless bodies of many Chinese police officers and Hong Kong drug criminals. The actual lethal-injection scene follows, lasting almost 85 seconds. First, we see a close-up of Timmy's arm being strapped down to the gurney as he desperately struggles and attempts to negotiate. Next, we see an even more extreme close-up of a needle being inserted into a vein (Figure 3). This causes Timmy to panic and hyperventilate, frantically bargaining for his life. Even though the actual injection has yet to begin, Timmy's breathing increases, causing him to choke and cough. The executioners ignore Timmy's last-minute pleas and cover his face with a piece of black cloth. One of the men in the room calmly presses a button to administer the first injection (Figures 4 and 5). Almost immediately, Timmy's hyperventilation ceases and his breathing slows down. Soon after, the button for the second—and

⁶ David Bordwell, 'Mixing business with pleasure: Johnnie To's DRUG WAR', *Observations on Film Art*, 8 August 2013. <<http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2013/07/08/mixing-business-with-pleasure-johnnie-tos-drug-war/>> [accessed 1 December 2016].

last—injection is pressed. Timmy stops breathing, and the picture quickly fades to black (Figure 6). The film's ending leaves one feeling claustrophobic, glacial, and highly unsettled.



Figure 3



Figures 4 and 5 above, Figure 6 below.



I will now discuss the cultural and political implications of these onscreen internal bodily reflexes. Although it is tempting to appropriate Captain Zhang's and Timmy's characters as metaphors for the peoples of China and Hong Kong—in the sense that Captain Zhang is the merciless Chinese state apparatus and Timmy is the mercenary Hong Kong capitalist—I would like to also diverge towards a different interpretation of *Drug War's* visceral images as pure aesthetic products of Hong Kong's current relations with China. These may operate much like mental images in pure optical and sound situations, which need not be there for metaphorical reason but rather as aesthetic demonstrations of what Deleuze calls an 'any-space-whatever' within the images themselves.⁷ These kinds of images are not metaphorical, but simply there as a direct result of the film's situation as a direct representation of time. This can be understood by doing away with the literal understanding of *Drug War's* visceral images and instead examining the oblique feelings about the China–Hong Kong relations the film conveys—an approach that will require an aesthetic consideration of how the inner body exudes feelings with images of human organs.

Feelings elicited through internal organs in general have long been discussed in different disciplinary languages. In regard to the terminology, it is Jennifer Barker in film phenomenology who appropriates the medical term of the viscera in her 2009 book *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience*, originally referring to 'the organs of the digestive, respiratory, cardiovascular, urogenital, and endocrine systems, along with the spleen'.⁸ She argues that 'viscera—both human and cinematic—exhibit and inhabit a particular temporal structure that, in combination with the material/textual structures of the skin and the spatial structures of the musculature, forms the elements of our embodied experience of film'.⁹ As for the correlation between visceral sensations and political resistance from the perspective of the filmmaker, Glauber Rocha in postcolonial cinema studies proposes that hunger is an aesthetic third which cinema directors feel and act upon but do not intellectually understand.¹⁰ For Rocha, to make political cinema is not something one has to think about but instead only *feel* about, seeing as how the feeling of hunger (in impoverished Latin American postcolonial conditions) is so compelling that it drives one to make movies.

Although both Barker and Rocha have highlighted the general importance of the viscera as both perceptible and sentient vehicles of visual experience, Deleuze's appropriation of the Brechtian idea, *gestus*, further helps to examine specifically *Drug War's* visceral visuality. From the spectator's perspective, Deleuze suggests that the *gestus* can be thought of as a relational logic of 'bodily attitudes':¹¹

⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), p. 5.

⁸ Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), p. 124.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

¹⁰ Glauber Rocha, 'The Aesthetics of Hunger', in *Twenty-Five Years of the New Latin American Cinema*, ed. by Michael Chanan (London: BFI, 1983), pp. 13–14 (pp. 13–14).

¹¹ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 193.

What we call gest in general is the link or knot of attitudes between themselves, their coordination with each other, in so far as *they do not depend on a previous story, a pre-existing plot or an action-image*. On the contrary, the gest is the development of attitudes themselves, and, as such, carries out a direct theatricalization of bodies, often *very discreet*, because it takes place independently of any role.¹²

Originally, Brecht referred to the *gestus* as an epic theatrical acting method of using only character gestures or movements (but not contextualised, elaborated, plot-oriented emotions). As Elena del Rio explains, the *gestus* of a character not only concerns the physical gesture but is also a reflection of ‘the socioeconomic and political situation that subtends the gesture and shapes identity’.¹³ Combining these two explanations of the *gestus*, one may infer that the previously explained visceral images in *Drug War* compose an overarching gest that shows a social habit of (dis)regarding human bodies within the PRC’s judicial culture. The unusual formal characteristic of visceral visuality, as in the two examples of defecating and hyperventilating discussed above, reveals some unspoken social commentaries (‘very discreet’, as in Deleuze’s quote above) of the film, forming a coordinated linkage between different bodily attitudes: a gest of intruded human bodies without personhood—a socially accepted attitude condoning the dissolution of the boundary between the exterior and interior of the body, between public and private space, and between the communal and personal integrity. This gest surpasses any previous stories, pre-existing plots, or action-images when it comes to contemplating *Drug War*’s cultural implications.¹⁴

As a result of this gestic bodily logic from Mainland China, the internal bodies in *Drug War* demonstrate a visceral type of political resistance in multiple sensory modalities against intra-body violence. Whether the intruding substances into the bodies of *Drug War* are state weapons (such as poison during an execution) or self-inflicted capitalist/criminal possessions (such as illegal drugs stored in pods, meth inhaled during a factory explosion), they are equally inhumane and violent. It does not matter whether the Hong Kong drug criminal antagonists in the diegesis deserve their punishments, because, in the film’s gestic visual logic, their situations do not have to be contextualised in a narrative sense. Rather, the point is that when it comes to both policing and criminality in China, the integrity of personhood is completely disrespected; both the authorities and the criminals are dehumanised as animals, robots, or zombies in an authoritarian judicial culture.¹⁵ Instead of functioning as a formal convention typically employed in horror films, the

¹² Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 192. Emphasis added.

¹³ Elena del Rio, *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance: Powers of Affection* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p. 70.

¹⁴ For the action-image, see Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Athlone, 2003), pp. 141–77.

¹⁵ For instance, one can perceive the three characters, Li Guangcheng, Captain Zhang, and Timmy Choi, as subhumans in *Drug War*. Their characters’ development is next to non-existent, partially due to state censorship, but possibly also for stylistic reasons. One commonality the two protagonists (Captain Zhang and Timmy) and the side character (Li) (played by Yin Zhusheng) share is that they are all one-dimensional “inhuman” characters. There is not a hint of personhood whatsoever in these characters, who are all, regardless of their social status, animalistic and

gestic visuality of the intruded viscera in *Drug War* reduces the images to minimum contextualisation, displaying human bodies as a direct experience—as reality, as an unpremeditated vernacular idiom.¹⁶ Even though this kind of visuality does not deliberately pose as political images, as Deleuze argues, it turns completely political, just like the purely descriptive images Godard creates in *Two or Three Things I Know about Her* for the purpose of observing the mutations of social reality (perhaps, one can imagine, almost like in a documentary, as opposed to telling a continuous story in a narrative film).¹⁷ This is how the haptic signs of *Drug War*'s visceral images evoke a potential for political resistance.

Therefore, in regard to *Drug War*'s aesthetic intervention of China–Hong Kong national politics, its images of disturbed viscera are discreet but visually powerful attempts at political resistance, epitomising the PRC's authoritarian judicial culture. The film's bodily gest, as opposed to its plot, directly reflects the troubling social reality circumscribing the film. As Brecht suggests, the 'expressions of a gest are usually highly complicated and contradictory, so that they cannot be rendered by any single word and the actor must take care that in giving his image the necessary emphasis he does not lose anything, but emphasizes the entire complex'.¹⁸ Likewise, it is impossible to simplistically reduce *Drug War*'s visceral images to a single message about the PRC's judicial culture, yet they obviously reveal a socially accepted attitude of regarding the interior of the body as a permeable and penetrable political landscape. In this sense, the film's aesthetic profile is necessarily political, connecting its gestic visceral images and the postmillennial China–Hong Kong's reality. This is why Brecht originally determines that a gest must be social and political, with which Deleuze agrees.¹⁹

To be fair, it is not only the PRC's authoritarian judiciary that *Drug War*'s repulsive visceral visuality effectively calls into question, but also post-1997 Hong Kong's corrupt late capitalist culture. These two hegemonies the Hong Kong people endure have equally contributed to the lack of respect for personhood in the film, violating the inner body, the private space, and personal integrity. Distinct (anti-)aesthetic images—in the forms of bodily waste, fluid, vomit, x-rays, pulse,

trying to survive. In the chase scene where Li is caught by Captain Zhang, we see in a long shot these men running in the woods, finally leading up to Captain Zhang's capturing Li like an animal. As for Captain Zhang, he is a flat impassive character with no particular familial, platonic, or romantic relationships. Like a robot, he dedicates his life to his job, but his purpose of existence is unclear. Timmy's character is the polar opposite; he has family and friends, but he has no problem betraying them all. He smiles, he cries—but his emotions are all shallow. He loves only money and freedom, but for no apparent reason. Indeed, the pending demise of Timmy's character is visually foreshadowed rather early in the film, when Captain Zhang catches Timmy hiding in a refrigerated drawer in a mortuary—it is understood that Timmy's character is merely delaying his final death; he is essentially a "dead man walking", a zombie. As Fan argues, they are both *homines sacri* in an Agambenian sense: bare lives of lawlessness and animality. See Victor Fan, 'Cultural extraterritoriality: Intra-regional politics in contemporary Hong Kong cinema', *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture*, 1(3) (2015), pp. 389–402.

¹⁶ See Miriam Hansen, 'The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism', *Modernism/Modernity*, 6(2) (1999), 59–77.

¹⁷ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 19.

¹⁸ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theater: The Development of an Aesthetic*, trans. by John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1988), p. 200.

¹⁹ See *Ibid.*, p. 197.

and inhalation—have characterised both the PRC’s authoritarian judiciary and Hong Kong’s corrupt late capitalism, which one may consider as Hong Kong’s vernacular visual idioms. Oddly, these idioms have achieved a strange, perverse kind of aesthetic “currency”, in the way that they invite the viewers to directly and physically confront the social reality in the China–Hong Kong context with spontaneous emotions. This kind of viewers’ engagement is perhaps similar to what Linda Williams suggests as the way an audience engages with the body genres in, for instance, pornography, horror, melodrama: the excessive sensations presented in the images of these genres can physically move the spectator’s body—convulsions, spasms, crying, screaming—since these audience responses are often uncontrollable.²⁰ Likewise, the emotions elicited from *Drug War*’s audience when it comes to images of feces and execution are also not so much rationally reflected thoughts but rather shock, fear, and agitation one cannot anticipate or control (exemplified by Bordwell as discussed above). On the contrary, dialogue, a sound effect frequently used for meaning-making in film, is not much of an important formal technique in *Drug War*.

A similar idea that repulsive spectacles can do away with words and offer an affective viewing experience can be found in Artaud’s theatrical language of the Theatre of Cruelty.²¹ He calls for a restoration of a ‘convulsive conception of life’ in the theater.²² By this he means, for instance, a theater with ‘monsters, debauches of heroes and gods, plastic revelations of forces, explosive interjections of a poetry and humor poised to disorganize and pulverize appearances [...] in an atmosphere of hypnotic suggestion in which the mind is affected by a direct pressure upon the senses’.²³ Artaud essentially urges for a breakdown of classical aestheticism, decency, stability, and control, replacing it with perhaps what one may call an anti-aesthetic of delirium (monsters), foulness (debauches of heroes and gods), aggression (plastic revelations of forces), and incontinence (interjections of poetry and humor). In this kind of theater, ‘the spectator is in the center and the spectacle surrounds him’.²⁴

A parallel example in *Drug War* can be found in the jarring scene in which Timmy vomits almost directly at the camera, establishing a relationship between a disturbed spectator and a foul spectacle. He spits up some white foamy substance in his compact car, throwing up so violently that his vomit splatters all over the dashboard and windshield (Figure 7). The camera sits on the hood, making it feel like Timmy is about to retch on the spectator. When Timmy’s car crashes into a restaurant and finally comes to a stop, we see him passed out, still spewing foam (Figure 8). The sight of his retching, his puking, and his frothing at the mouth, occurring immediately after a six-second shot at the beginning of the film, comes as a shock, an attack on the audience’s sensorium (‘a direct pressure upon the senses’, in Artaud’s words). Although the camera sits in a locked

²⁰ Linda Williams, ‘Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess’, in *Feminist Film Theory*, ed. by Sue Thornham (New York: New York University Press, 1999), pp. 269–81.

²¹ See Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. by Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove, 1958), p. 89.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 122.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

position, the sight of a man recklessly driving, vomiting, and making a mess of himself essentially makes the spectator psychologically push back. The spectacle (Timmy) pushes the spectator (camera) to the center in this viewing experience, and thus the spectator's psychological pushback becomes an embodied movement, a kinesthetic viewing experience that invites viewers to confront the social reality where this culture of the violated viscera takes place—when a lawless, self-destructive capitalist accidentally blows up his meth factory and gets his wife killed. The idioms of cinematic cruelty in this scene show how post-1997 Hong Kong's corrupt late capitalism erases a Hong Kong man's personhood—his personal life, freedom, and dignity—all for the sake of profit.



Figure 7 above, Figure 8 below



The Politics of Abjection in Visceral Visuality

In reference to neo-Lacanian film theory, this cruel and provocative visual encounter between the camera and the repulsive spectacle in *Drug War* demonstrates a kind of ‘cinematic unconscious’—a paradoxical knowledge that the cinema unknowingly shows but does not consciously “know” itself, as Vighi defines the term.²⁵ The affect of disgust which *Drug War* informs, and which cannot be reduced to a single political message but only a complex political attitude, is an example of cinematic unconscious when it comes to understanding Hong Kong’s political situation, perhaps similar to what Brecht refers to as the *gest*. In a film culture context, *Drug War*’s cinematic unconscious is an enigmatic, heteroglossic type of affective political knowledge, or perhaps, in general terms, a local “taste”—a politically inextricable type of sensibility that To’s cinema, or even To himself, does not consciously “know” or intentionally “represent” but rather symptomatically exhibits itself when local cinema responds to the city’s political happenings. As Vighi explains, a cinematic unconscious can only come about as the mind’s traumatic encounters with the Real, something loosely translated as the true state of the world that, according to Lacan, is impossible to be communicated with the available functions of the symbolic order.²⁶ Similarly, in *Drug War*, the true state of Hong Kong’s political reality (the Real) cannot be rationally represented or analogised (told with tropes of film language, such as realism or allegory), but is intuitively revealed at a sensorial, visceral level with the film’s uncanny (anti-)aesthetic of disgust.

If Vighi is right, what socio-psychological issue does *Drug War*’s cinematic unconscious inform through the film’s repulsive images about Hong Kong’s political culture? I argue that the opaque socio-psychological issue beneath the film’s images of involuntary bodily responses—resulting from the intrusion of alien objects—is a kind of cultural haphephobia (fear of touching): since the border between Hong Kong and China gradually diminished after the 1997 transfer of sovereignty, there has been an increasingly haphephobic affect in postmillennial Hong Kong society. The fear of cross-border contact and exchange in Hong Kong’s current public sphere, resulting from the accelerated exchange of capital, people, and culture between Hong Kong and the PRC, is undeniable. The overwhelming immediate contact and exchange—not only with physical bodies, but also capital, cultural products, and so forth—thematise *Drug War*’s images of trespassed bodies in post-1997 Hong Kong. I will base this parallel between the visual and political perceptions of China–Hong Kong relations on Bataille’s sociological theory—a theory that would later be called “abjection” by the psychoanalytic theorist Julia Kristeva—to explain the social process that politico-economic minorities (like the people of Hong Kong) have to undergo when their sovereignties are forcefully implemented, and how, in the end, an uncanny interest in violated human bodies in their film experience may develop.

²⁵ Fabio Vighi, *Traumatic Encounters in Italian Film: Locating the Cinematic Unconscious* (Bristol: Intellect, 2006), p. 8.

²⁶ See *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9, 70–71.

Bataille writes about how a forced sovereignty controls a politico-economic minority, whom he calls “the miserable”.

[T]he imperative forces do not exercise their coercive action directly on the oppressed: they content themselves with excluding them by prohibiting any contact. The splendor of sovereignty is merely the consequence of the movement of aversion which elevates it above the impure human mass. Miserable exploitation is abandoned to the organizers of production (to representatives of *homogeneous* society), especially to the police, that is to say, to a section of the population which is itself miserable; the profound internal divisions of the *miserables* end up thus in an infinite subjugation.²⁷

This means, in a case of forced sovereignty, that the sovereign nobles isolate themselves from the citizens (the miserable, the human mass, the abject). Contact only occurs between the citizens and the police (or any of the sovereign power's ‘organizers of production’/‘representatives of homogeneous society’); while staying afar, the nobles would use the police to inflict aversive activities upon the miserable. The police, possibly also members of the miserable population, do not even recognise that they are themselves used to defeat their own people. Therefore, this way of internally colonising a people is profound (‘the profound internal divisions of the *miserables*’).

Bataille's explanation of the abject's political condition resonates with the people of Hong Kong's current situation of excessive contact with the sovereign power's ‘organizers of production’ and ‘representatives of homogeneous society’, which explains Hong Kong's cultural haphophobia in *Drug War*. Since the abject (Hong Kong people) is politically disenfranchised (Hong Kong people cannot choose their Chief Executives), they are managed by the organisers of production—a case in point being the Hong Kong police in the 2014 pro-democracy Umbrella Revolution, when seven policemen used excessive force, including extrajudicial punishment on an already subdued protester.²⁸ The abject is also controlled by representatives of a homogeneous society, such as the Mainland Chinese tourists in the Individual Visit Scheme first introduced in 2003, which allowed tourists easy visits to Hong Kong from 49 Mainland Chinese cities. The tourists function as representatives of a homogeneous society: by over-inviting them, their economic activities in Hong Kong spatially homogenised the city as well as aligned it with the state's nationalistic interests. Although a limited number of the city's industries, such as retail and hoteliering, benefitted from The Scheme, the Hong Kong government failed to manage the resulting socioeconomic problems, such as inflation, unaffordable homes, and public services at overcapacity. In addition, Hong Kong's urban space was homogenised since The Scheme increasingly eliminated Hong Kong's

²⁷ Georges Bataille, ‘Abjection and Miserable Forms’, in *More & Less*, ed. by Sylvère Lotringer (Cambridge: Semiotext(e), 1993), pp. 8-14 (p. 9).

²⁸ On October 15th, 2014, in the midst of the Umbrella Revolution demonstrations, seven Hong Kong policemen were caught on camera in Hong Kong's Tamar Park, punching, kicking and stomping for four minutes, the protester Ken Tsang Kin-chiu, who had already been completely subdued on the ground. See Gene Lin, ‘Footage showing beating of Occupy activist Ken Tsang accepted by court as evidence’, *Hong Kong Free Press*, 28 June 2016. <<https://www.hongkongfp.com/2016/06/28/footage-showing-beating-of-occupy-activist-ken-tsang-accepted-by-court-as-evidence/>> [accessed 1 December 2019].

signature mix of old and new, traditional and modern, local and global. Independent and idiosyncratic businesses were replaced by homogeneous chain stores, creating a nearby bargain shopping hub for tourists. To top it off, Chinese tourism is arguably the plausible excuse why Hong Kong invested in the Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong Express Rail Link Hong Kong Section (XRL HK Section), a notoriously cost-ineffective infrastructural project. As a nationalistic homogenising attempt, the project aligns Hong Kong with the national high-speed rail network, China Railway High-Speed (CRH), although this rail largely overlaps with the city's already available and more cost-effective transportation options. All these examples illustrate Hong Kong's excessive (in)direct disciplinary and socioeconomic contact with China, which moves us towards an explanation of the political abject's cultural haphophobia.

Bataille first suggests the sociopolitical context of abjection without yet having completely developed abjection into a notion of resistance, a political undertaking with involuntary bodily responses. It was Kristeva who subsequently explained why abjection is a psychological resistance to unmanageable contact with foreignness. In Kristeva's account, abjection acts as the body's survival skills. She identifies the loathing of food as well as the encounters with cadavers as forms of abjection, as kinds of 'affects and thoughts' alarming her so much that meanings collapse.²⁹ When the body faces the horror of external objects, such as cadavers or some wrong food, it acts out: it vomits. It is a psychological alert signaling that the border between the self and the external world has been crossed. The external objects have crossed the line and disturbed the identity, order, and system of the self. When this happens, "[t]he border has become an object"; death has infected life. She must drop the waste 'so that [she] might live'.³⁰ Kristeva's psychological proposition is entirely consistent with how neuroscientists suggest that nausea and vomiting are a 'defense mechanism' to warn the host of a toxic challenge; the vomiting body's smell and taste receptors warn it of 'a noxious or poisonous substance in order to avoid its ingestion', whereby different stimuli can give rise to nausea and vomiting but where, with most cases, these are triggered by 'foreign stimuli of varying intensity', such as alcohol consumption, food poisoning, overeating, saltwater consumption, or food allergies.³¹ Located on the ventral surface of the brain stem, when the chemoreceptors in the area postrema (the chemoreceptor trigger zone (CTZ)) are stimulated, one vomits—such as in the case of Kristeva, the visual, olfactory, and gustatory contact with cadavers or some wrong food are relayed to the cortical and limbic systems, which 'interpret and give meaning to the experience' because 'fear or disgust at the sight, smell, or taste of something intensely disagreeable can precipitate nausea or even vomiting'.³² In other words, the disgust one feels about threatening external objects is largely uncontrollable with one's rational mind, because

²⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 1–4.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³¹ See Robert J. Naylor, 'Nausea and Vomiting', in *Encyclopedia of the Human Brain*, ed. by V.S. Ramachandran (Cambridge: Academic Press, 2002), pp. 273–89.

³² *Ibid.*

meanings are created by the visual, smell, and taste receptors of the brain. Vomiting is an instinctive psychological resistance to threats.

Similarly, in *Drug War*, one can see a pre-cultural instinct of the same psychological resistance to threats in the scene where Captain Zhang vomits. In this scene, vomiting demonstrates a pre-cultural knowledge of danger that can be passed along between two culturally disparate characters. Working undercover as a Mainland drug distributor, Captain Zhang meets an alleged Mainland drug supplier, Li Shuchang (played by Tan Kai), in a hotel room. Li offers Captain Zhang some cocaine to try. At first, Captain Zhang declines the offer, but Li says the deal will be off unless he tries the drug. Having no choice, Captain Zhang snorts two lines of cocaine. After Li leaves, Captain Zhang exhibits symptoms of cocaine overdose: getting dizzy and feeling bug bites all over his body. He falls on the floor, struggling painfully. A low-angle shot of Timmy follows. In it, Timmy gazes down at Captain Zhang, dumbfounded, because for the first time in the film, as a vanquished Hong Kong criminal, he can stare at Captain Zhang in a superior position in terms of survival knowledge, ready to demonstrate his Hong Kong underground shrewdness with Captain Zhang's body—essentially a kind of involuntary China–Hong Kong ventriloquism in a reversed power dynamic, signaling that vomiting is simply the body's survival instinct that goes beyond Mainland–Hong Kong cultural differences.

Timmy tells Captain Zhang to drink a lot of water and immerse himself in an ice bath. Although the Mainland policemen do not trust Timmy and subdue him, they unwillingly follow his instructions and help to save Captain Zhang from certain death. During this process, the audience sees Captain Zhang almost reenacting Timmy's own experiences of suffering (overdose), treatment (vomiting), and therapy (ice bath). Eventually, Captain Zhang is able to puke by pouring water down his throat and jumping into an ice bath. He essentially saves himself by learning how to lower his body temperature and vomit.

This example demonstrates how visceral-level resistance transpires in political struggles through abject involuntary bodily responses. In this scene, Captain Zhang is supposed to be ideologically opposite to Timmy—a Hong Kong criminal he deeply abhors—but since his life is on the line, instincts prevail ideologies. He follows Timmy's commands and survives his overdose. At this point, his actions become instinctive, because he cannot possibly save himself with rational thinking but can only go by intuition. Although he and Timmy are in a police–criminal, sovereign–regional, moral–immoral opposition to each other, at that critical moment of survival, vomiting becomes the only lifeline and connection for Captain Zhang.

One may also note that in this audiovisual example, abjection—as in the involuntary bodily responses like vomiting—does not only take place among the politically subordinated subjects (Hong Kong characters) but also among the displaced abject population submissively delegated by the sovereign state apparatus. This is consistent with Bataille's theory of sociological abjection: when a sovereign state governs an abject population, the police act as representatives of dominance, but they themselves have no political agency at all—much like the policeman

characters in *Drug War*, where the most feisty authorities are ironically the most slavish figures, used by the state like lifeless, disposable robots.³³ Therefore, the politics of abjection in visceral visuality is not so much about whether the abject is made to follow Chinese communism or Hong Kong late capitalism; it is about whether they can still rationally rely on any political ideology that respects their humanity as opposed to only relying on their visceral instincts in trying to survive with the little dignity they have left. Logically, this kind of resistance to threats will be, therefore, particularly pronounced with politically deprived/impotent figures, like the police and criminal characters in *Drug War*. As I explained above, because of their oddly one-dimensional characterisation, these characters have limited agency, and so their involuntary bodily responses as a type of political resistance demonstrate their will to live, their worth, and their dignity as humans. In their situations of political deprivation, they have little access to self-fulfillment (morality, mental satisfaction, personal relationships). The border between themselves and the external world has been foreclosed on. The passages in their bodies, expressed in the forms of feces, vomit, and hyperventilated breath, become the last immediate space of resistance to invasion—they can only resort to the viscera.

Over the ongoing power struggles between *Drug War*'s Mainland–Hong Kong duo, similar interlacing abjections form in a Hong Kong context, a unique socio-psychological example combining sociological abjection (Bataille) and psychological abjection. The duo stylistically demonstrates a politically abject sovereign–regional, center–marginal relationship, which underlies China's over-controlling sovereignty and the people of Hong Kong's matching resistance. The duo's antithetical positions in the diegesis—police vs. criminal, moral vs. immoral, good vs. bad—suggest both an obvious irreconcilable rupture between China and Hong Kong as well as a sense of a China–Hong Kong mutual failure: an all-for-nothing political outlook. Reflective of each other, the duo characterises two subhumans able to share experiences of being threatened and of surviving (as in Timmy ventriloquising survival knowledge for Captain Zhang) as well as mirroring each other's political impotence in an authoritative judicial culture. Although they both keep trying to overcome their corresponding hurdles throughout the film, it is predictable from the beginning that both characters will die in the end, since they are portrayed as either a dead man walking or a robot, only going through the motions. Unlike most cops-and-robbers films, it is futile to expect a resolution in *Drug War*'s plot.

While this rendition of political abjection in *Drug War* seems to have connoted only negative messages so far, its case with Hong Kong, however, demonstrates a positive function of renegotiating and rediscovering one's identity in a psychological sense. Kristeva writes that during her abjection, she falls into almost a state of limbo where she loses herself 'as a radically separate, loathsome' non-person, or even non-thing. She thinks of herself in that moment as '[n]ot me. Not that. But not nothing, either'. She becomes a "something" that [she does] not recognize as a thing'.³⁴ Victor Turner also offers an anthropological vocabulary to describe this transient abject

³³ The policemen, for instance, do not even make enough money for toll fees when following criminals.

³⁴ Kristeva, p. 2. For religious attempts at purifying the abject, see Kristeva, pp. 17, 32-112.

space: the liminal. As he explains, the 'liminaries' are those undergoing 'liminality', which may be described as the 'state and process of mid-transition', referring to a corridor or tunnel some religious people go through in certain rites. The liminaries are 'betwixt-and-between established states of politico-jural structure [...] neither-this-nor-that, here-nor-there, one-thing-nor-the-other'.³⁵ In other words, their identities change; the abject liminaries rediscover themselves. On the film *The Tingler* (1959), the interdisciplinary scholar Mikita Brottman raises a consonant argument that the release of bodily contents, such as feces (defecation) and air (screaming), aims at stripping off threats of contamination—hence, involuntary reactions to cleanse, to renew a person, to rediscover a new identity.³⁶

Likewise, in *Drug War*, Timmy's identity also goes through constant renegotiation and rediscovery. He is first seen as a Hong Kong criminal, destined to be executed in Mainland. He then becomes a police informant in exchange for a lighter sentence, even going so far as to save the squad chief from death. However, after a police raid of his drug house, because two of his apprentices have escaped, the police start doubting him, making him change his position once again. He decides to secretly reunite with his drug gang from Hong Kong and ditch the police. Still, only close to the end of the film, the audience realises that he has planned to also ditch his own gang and escape alone—he is a man of no consistent attitudes, always ready to adopt a new role when opportunities arise.

This kind of rapid role shifting change of Timmy's character is reminiscent of Hong Kong's people's historical shifts of their cultural positions. Since the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration, the people of Hong Kong's self-recognition of their cultural identities has been one in flux. For instance, as of October 2016, compared with the figures from 1997, only about half of the people who previously identified themselves as "Chinese in Hong Kong" retained such cultural identity; twice as many identified themselves as a "Hongkonger" when compared to eight years ago.³⁷ They thought they were Chinese when they were not people of the PRC, but they deny they are Chinese when Hong Kong is now part of the PRC. While this might seemingly indicate a rise of localism among the population, this is not quite the case. In the first five years after the 2003 commencement of The Scheme, there was no clear increase in Hongkongers who identified as non-Chinese. It seems the social integration brought to Hong Kong society by The Scheme was cordially appreciated, and so were the economic benefits, especially after the disastrous 2003 SARS epidemic, yet long before The Scheme's resulting socioeconomic aftermath. It was not until 2008, after an expected plunge of the Hongkonger identity (due to more Hong Kong people identifying as Chinese during the Beijing Olympics), when an obvious rise of people identifying themselves

³⁵ Victor Turner, 'Variations on a Theme of Liminality', in *Secular Ritual*, ed. by Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff (Assen/Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1977), pp. 36–52, p. 37.

³⁶ See Mikita Brottman, 'Faecal Phantoms: Oral and Anal Tensions in *The Tingler*', in *Trash Aesthetics: Popular Culture and Its Audience*, ed. by Deborah Cartmell, I.Q. Hunter, Heidi Kaye, and Imelda Whelehan (London: Pluto, 1997), pp. 103–117.

³⁷ 'POP Poll', *Public Opinion Programme, The University of Hong Kong*. <<https://www.hkupop.hku.hk/english/>> [accessed 1 December 2019].

as Hongkongers occurred, climbing over nine years to its current historic high. Therefore, localism is not a valid argument to fully explain the Hong Kong people's periodic shifting of their cultural positions.

Of course, their changes in cultural identities can be attributed to many circumstantial factors, including the lack of affordable housing, overloaded universal healthcare, hyperinflation, and so forth. Nevertheless, while there may be many incidental reasons for these dramatic fluctuations of Hong Kong people's self-recognition (which are beyond the scope of this article), it is still quite obvious that, since the early 1980s, discussion of the handover of Hong Kong's sovereignty has a track record of receptive reflection on the people's current situations, necessitating a rediscovery of themselves, a reevaluation of their cultural positions, and a reinvention of their identities. In the rapidly changing local political climate, for better or for worse, the people of Hong Kong's rediscovery of themselves never ceases to amaze.

Conclusion

This paper discusses the unusual and rich visceral visuality in *Drug War*, suggesting that the film's images of the trespassing of alien objects in the body harbor strong political implications. The gestic aesthetic in *Drug War* reveals the film's unique visual interest in violated human bodies in post-socialist China. The bodily gest in *Drug War* demonstrates a social acceptance of trespassing the policing and criminal bodies, and the film's provocative visual encounter between the camera and the repulsive spectacle further elicits a kind of haphophobia, an affect resonant with the perception of Mainland China in Hong Kong's current public sphere. This cinematic haphophobia epitomises Hong Kong's excessive contact with Mainland Chinese, a central issue affecting the life in the city especially after 1997. However, according to Bataille and Kristeva, the social and psychological processes of abjection—that, I argue, the haphophobic must experience—may allow the political abjects some possibility of political agency in the end. They may rediscover new cultural identities and find new political standings with their sovereign state in the process of abjection.

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