

Savage Love: Violence in Service of Romance in the Films of Dante Lam

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The climax of "Jiang Hu: The Triad Zone" (Dante Lam Chiu-Yin, 2000) opens inside a restaurant where triad boss Jimmy Yam is having dinner with his wife Sophie, shortly after the revelation that he has had a mistress for the last several months. The restaurant is empty and quiet. The conversation is as tense as it is sparse. Chewing sounds dominate the sound track. Tonight Yam has ordered his body guards to wait outside, so that he and his wife can be alone to hash things out. At this vulnerable moment, a young thug with a grudge named Tiger arrives around the corner on a moped with his girlfriend in the back seat. As Tiger pulls up, Lam shows the moped only from foot level down. Signaling his arrival, when the moped stops, lightening flashes in the background, just as it did earlier when Yam first met Tiger on a rainy night.

Tiger's head shines, having been lovingly shaved by his girlfriend in the previous scene. Stepping off the bike, he tells her to wait there, takes off his jacket, and then kisses her. The camera moves closer as she wraps her arms around him, rubbing the back of his neck and head. The film cuts to Yam and his wife having a few quite bites of food. The next shot is from below Tiger. At the cut, up-tempo electronic music starts. Tiger stands looking off into the distance with his machete at his side. As the camera rises, lighting strikes and the pan upward is given a jump. The next shot is from behind three of Yam's body guards who huddle in the middle of the frame off in the distance. The camera

follows Tiger as he runs towards them, thrusting his knife into the stomach of the man at the center. The frame pauses at the moment of impact. The victim grabs the blade, but with a twist and an upward thrust, Tiger manages to remove his enemy's fingers, which we see flying into the air. The camera moves under Tiger's left arm, which wields the hatchet. The man to the left ineffectively blocks, suffering a deep wound in the flesh of his forearm arm. The man to the right takes a cut across the chest. The camera moves behind and then back in front of Tiger as he drives his machete in overhead axe chops over the chests and arms of Yam's men. After a short tussle, and a bottle to the head, two of the men hold Tiger's arms and a third drives a punching blade into his belly. A close-up shows Tiger's face stretched out in agony; his head bobs back and forth four times as he groans in slow motion. A reverse-shot reveals the eyes of the attacker who is slightly off to the right side of the frame. A sudden swipe and the stabber is knocked away by Tiger's girlfriend, who in return is knocked hard to the ground, perhaps suffering a knife wound to the neck. Tiger recovers and dispatches with the guards. He runs towards his girlfriend and picks her up. We see Yam's blood soaked men lying on the ground. Tiger drags his lover to the nearest doorstep. They both sit panting, draped across a stoop on top of one another. Exhausted his lover says "Don't worry about me." Slowly raising her hand, she points and says "He's coming."

With only a moments rest, Tiger spots Yam leaving the restaurant with only one guard for protection. The film cuts to a long shot of Tiger holding up a few dollars that he owes to Yam. Tiger throws the money in the air and takes off

in pursuit. Immediately, Yam grabs his wife's hand and starts running in the opposite direction. Rather than accompanying the chase with aggressive music with strong base and a fast tempo, Lam slows down the visuals and starts a lulling romantic song. This marks the middle of the climax of "Jiang Hu," before the violence engulfs the parallel couple – Yam and Sophie.

In "Jiang Hu," Dante Lam achieves an unprecedented union of violence and romance. In this article, I attempt to place "Jiang Hu" within Lam's body of work and assess its significance in the history of Hong Kong cinema. Lam aims to provoke a Baudelairean combination of visceral responses on the part of the viewer – heartfelt sympathy for romantic longing and cringing disgust at localized and familiar bodily wounding. In "Jiang Hu" we find a convergence of Lam's two emotional goals, but none of his other films combine these seemingly conflicting responses with as much clarity. Throughout his career, Lam has been exploring possible answers to the question he inherited from his local tradition: "What should a Hong Kong romance look like?" Most of his films alternate between the expression of romantic love and the portrayal of bodily violence, and he is at his best when these two goals are integrated. At base, his films involve the search for the union of violence and romantic attachment. I hope to show how these two elements are developed in Lam's work, with a focus on those films that are most successful – "Beast Cops," "When I Look Upon the Stars," and "Jiang Hu: The Triad Zone."

Dante Lam and Hong Kong Cinema

The second installment in Gordan Chan's techno-cop series, "G4: Option Zero" (1997), was Hong Kong director Dante Lam's debut. Since 1997, Lam has directed, on average, a film a year: "Beast Cops" (1998), "When I Look Upon the Stars" (1999), "Jiang Hu: the Triad Zone" (2000), "Hit Team" (2001), "Runaway" (2001), "Tiramisu" (2002), and "The Twins Effect" (2003). Although still something of a newcomer to Hong Kong cinema, during the short history of his career Lam has proved to be a versatile director working in a variety of genres: techno cop, good cop/ bad cop, teen romance, ghost romance, twenty-something romance, and anti-triad. With the exception of "Hit Team", all of Lam's action films add a significant romantic element to primarily masculine genres. Putting a priority on romantic attachment can lead to innovative scenarios, storylines, and style, especially when combined with meta-genre films. The emphasis on romance adds a freshness to some of Lam's films, as he enhances heavily worked genres.

Lam is an up and coming genre director with a soft spot: he has three solid movies and arguably one excellent film under his belt. He has already earned some local critical success with "Beast Cops," which won the Hong Kong Film Critic's best picture award in 1998, and "Jiang Hu: The Triad Zone," (2000) which was generally well received. Jackie Chan, Donnie Yen, and Bey Logan are all involved in Lam's most recent project, "The Twins Effect."

In this article, I have two goals: to give an overview of the films Lam has directed, periodically stopping to look at some highlights, and to explore the significance of the effort he devotes to romance. Studying Lam can be

instructive for a number of reasons. Based on "Jiang Hu" alone, he is a mid-level director already worthy of some attention. In addition, his steady output indicates an ability to get financing, suggesting at least a moderately successful record of accomplishment. Paying attention to his films can tell us about one way to stay in business as a filmmaker in Hong Kong, where for almost a decade audiences have been reluctant to pay the price of a ticket for local films.

Lam's directorial debut in 1997, roughly coincides with the British handover of Hong Kong to China, suggesting a new phase in Hong Kong cinema. Though the 1994 crash in the Hong Kong film industry probably provides a better marker for a period shift, 1997 may prove to draw a significant line in Hong Kong film history. No longer can hypochondriac scholars attribute every theme of uncertainty as a symptom of the 1997 Syndrome. Perhaps also indicative of a shift in Hong Kong film around the time of re-unification, 1997 has been called "the year of the protégée."¹ Apprentices of Gordon Chan, Johnny To, and Stanley Kwan all debuted films that year: Dante Lam with "G4; Option Zero"; Yau Tat-chi with "The Odd One Dies"; and Yip Kam-hung with "Love is not a Game but a Joke." Significantly, all three films have heavily romance-infused story lines.²

Dante Lam's early experiments in the presentation of violence led to results conducive to creating jarring emotional impact. When Lam discovered how to unite visceral violence and romance in "Jiang Hu", the outcome was his first successful presentation of what romance should look like in a Hong Kong film aware of its cinematic history. It is important to note that there is no strong

local tradition for uniting romance and violence, though romance is not alien to Hong Kong action cinema. 1960's new *wuxia pain* pioneers Zhang Che and King Hu minimize romance. In Bruce Lee's films romance is only secondary, adding some character complexity. For instance, in "First of Fury" (1971) the romance serves to further complicate the order for Lee's character to leave Shanghai. The story is a drawn out revenge fantasy interspersed with a few scenes of Chen and his girl. Jackie Chan generally treats romance comically, giving it little motivational weight. John Woo on the other hand treats romance obliquely, bringing homo-eroticism almost to the surface. In "Better off Tomorrow" the intimacy between Mark (Chow Yun-fat) and Ho (Ti Lung) motivates Mark's self-sacrifice in the climax, but any explicit romantic elements are below the surface.

More complicated treatments of romance occur in three of the best Hong Kong actions films of the 80's and 90's: "Peking Opera Blues" (Tsui Hark, 1986), "Task Force" (Patrick Leung, 1997), and "Expect the Unexpected" (Patrick Yau and Johnnie To, 1998). "Peking Opera Blues" features a gender bending romantic story line based on political intrigue. Though the romance is heavily ingrained within the action -- the action furthering romantic attachment and romance motivating action -- the violence is mostly theatrical or operatic. As such, it lacks the visceral impact of Hong Kong action. "Task Force" is a cop meets moll story full of self-referential genre parody. Rather than uniting the two romantic leads through violence, the ex-boyfriend gangster sacrifices himself in service of the central couple. "Expect the Unexpected" unites romance and violence in the creation of suspense and as a setup for a sudden reversal. Two

detectives fall for the same woman; a key holder at a crime scene indicates that she might have been a victim to the savage gang. This sets in motion a suspenseful episode that is resolved through a comic resolution when they discover that the key bag was just coincidentally the same. The lighthearted resolution sets up the viewer for the sudden reversal of fortunes at the end. The lover's shock upon witnessing the death of her suitors adds pathos to the twist. Though these three films heavily integrate violence and romance, the violence is only tangentially in service of the romance. Dante Lam's achievement is in bringing the violence directly to the couple in order to develop the romance.

Lam's films can be roughly divided into cop films and romantic comedies, but, as is often the case in recent Hong Kong cinema, no one genre can describe a single movie. I will look at the Lam films that are primarily action focused and then examine those that are mainly devoted to romance before showing how the two elements work together in "Jiang Hu."

Beauty and the Beast

Dante Lam's cop films are of two types: techno cops and rogue cop stories. "G4: Option Zero" (1997) is of the first type, and the characters in "Hit Team" (2000) sit on the rogue cop / crook fence. The other kind of police film is best represented by "Beast Cops," a stylistic anomaly as well as a genre-bending film packed with cinematic references and in-jokes. The manner of the violence presentation varies between the two types of films, with gun violence serving as the distinguishing characteristic of the techno cop films and one-on-one knife

violence occurring frequently in the underworld locations of the compromised cop. Looking for innovative ways to draw on the tradition of Hong Kong cinema, Lam extends the late 90's trend of experimenting with alternatives to the pause-burst-pause style of action presentation. For the most part, Lam's action sequences are, unfortunately, more like the clumsy tussles found in Hollywood than the percussive battles of Chang Che or Yuen Kwai.³ Lam's significance to Hong Kong action cinema is in bringing the tradition of swordplay to the streets via the kitchen cleaver. Another distinguishing feature of his action films is the effort devoted to the development of romantic story lines. Generally, the editing is more precise and the shots are shorter and involve more careful camera setups in his scenes involving the development of a relationship than in those presenting a violent confrontation.

Lam's first film, "G4: Option Zero" (1997) is a techno cop action story with a love triangle. Set just prior to the British handover of Hong Kong to the PRC, Cheung Ch-Lam plays Ai, a cop working for the SD (Special Division of the Hong Kong police force). As with most hard working movie-cops, Ai's home life is a mess; he neglects his girlfriend Kelley who just recently moved into his apartment. Further straining the relationship, one of Ai's team members, Monica, has obvious feelings for him. Though we spend a good half of the screen time with the women characters, neither of Ai's relationships is very well developed. The greatest emotional pull comes from the death of Anthony Wong's character, which serves to motivate the chance-driven finale with the desire for revenge.

"G4" is important for Lam since it allows him to direct some of the actors who compose his stock cast, such as Anthony Wong and Michael Anthony Wong, who become the two central characters in "Beast Cops." It also gives Lam a chance to experiment with the integration of violence and romance. With the typical level of expositional rigor found in Hong Kong cinema, we never learn just what "Option Zero" is, other than briefly seeing it as a name of a file Monica copies from the hard drive of a Korean arms dealer. G4 stands for the elite task force of "weird" super cops which is introduced an hour and 15 minutes into the movie in order to give Michael Wong some screen time and to get Monica out of the picture for the final action scene.

The relationship between the romantic storyline and the action sequences shows a heavy preference for the former. "G4" is unlike most action films, such as "Total Recall", where the romance serves only a secondary role. In "Total Recall," romance plays only a minor motivational factor for Schwarzenegger's character. In addition, the romance in "G4" is not heavily integrated with the action, such as it is in "Die Hard" (John McTiernan, 1988) where the relationship between John McClane (Bruce Willis) and his wife, Holly (Bonnie Bedelia), plays a crucial causal role in the development of the conflict, which when resolved also serves to reunite the couple. However, in "Die Hard" the romance is decidedly secondary and depends on the action. Similarly, the romance in "Speed" (Jan de Bont, 1994) is a secondary factor, arising only from the action. The relationship developed between Jack (Keanu Reeves) and Annie (Sandra Bullock) has no independent development and progresses only as new obstacles are faced. The

degree of dependence on the action sequences is emphasized in the dialogue, where the two characters worry that romances based on traumatic events seldom last very long. Conversely, the romance in "G4" is primary and the action sequences seem to only fulfill genre requirements. Unlike "Jiang Hu," in "G4" the violence and romance are never fully integrated. The romantic elements near the end of "G4" appear in a typically Hollywood fashion, where previously underdeveloped romantic elements emerge, dependent on the action. As we shall see, the situation is reversed in "Jiang Hu," where the action is put in service of romance -- helping add emotional impact to the independently developing romantic story.

The final and longest action sequence in "G4" has a mysterious causal relationship to the rest of the narrative. The main character's partner suggests that they apply to take over a low-risk case guarding a Korean official, because Kelly's PR agent is handling his publicity. Since Monica, Ai's ex-partner fails to make it into G4, the action allows Ai and Kelley to fight together, fulfilling Kelley's earlier expressed wish to be in his thoughts when he is in danger. Though Kelley's rescue nearly kills Ai and the action serves to bring the pair back together, the goals of the scene are frustrated. The bond between the two characters appears to be shallow and the desire for Wong's revenge interferes with the mood necessary for love. The action-romance hybrid fails in "G4" primarily because the romance between the two leads is critically under developed. The majority of the film explores Ai and Kelley's parallel lives. Only one scene before the finale shows them together.

Although the action sequences are as underdeveloped as the romantic attachments in "G4," Lam experiments with new techniques of action presentation. He attempts to build into the primary action sequences a frantic intensity, but evokes little more than confusion. In an early scene where the team hunts down an assassin on the street, Lam effectively conveys the anxiety Ai feels upon losing his partner. When the chase begins, Lam cuts across the axis of action from a medium-shot to a long-shot, reestablishing the character's spatial relationships as they begin to run. This serves to completely disorient the viewer, and convey confusion. The shoot-out-on-the-steps sequence in the climax appears to have been hurriedly shot with very few camera setups. The entire sequence is filmed using hand held cameras that quickly pan to reveal the action unfolding out of frame. Rather than expressing the feeling of being lost in a crowd, one cut across the axis of action serves to deflate the conflict in a crucial gun battle, as shots appear to be fired into uninhabited space. In the early monk in the market sequence in "Blade" (1995), Tsui Hark gives his hand held cameras the p.o.v. of cowardly participants in the fight, who circle the action looking for an opportune time to attack; however, the p.o.v. of Lam's hand held camera is that of a confused spectator, immune to ongoing violence surrounding its perspective. This saps intensity from the shoot-out, since rather than bringing us into and punctuating the action, the camera is like a spectator at a tennis match – seemingly instructed to whip-pan left, whip-pan right, and then repeat. In "G4" Lam experiments with how to bring the action and romance together for a forceful emotional impact, but the film fails to show what a Hong Kong romance

should look like. The action is listless and the romance is passionless, and nothing noteworthy is achieved by their combination.

Unlike "G4," "Hit Team" (2001) is uncharacteristic for Lam in that male-female romance is deeply subdued. A group of cops quits the force to rob a triad bank in order to earn enough cash to pay for their wounded partner's rehab treatments. A rival group of cops, the Hit Team, is assigned to investigate one of their robberies. The two groups struggle against each other, serving as motivation for a parade of police technology. The film is more focused on the presentation of beautiful men and their fantastic guns than on any romance infused plot line. Apparently, casting decisions were made based on the entrance criteria Michael Wong's character gives for G4 membership in "Option Zero": you should be able to fight like a warrior and look like a model. However, the second criterion is clearly more heavily weighted. "Hit Team" fails to provide adequate character motivation, since the major element driving the story is left behind as soon as a better looking couple with bigger guns appear.

Law Kar-Leung, a director of Shaw Bros martial arts films, sought to document the techniques and styles to which he devoted his life. Dante Lam's films share a similar documentary impulse, cataloging various police gadgetry and technique. The cast information on the DVD explains that Lam brought to the production a special knowledge of police technique and weaponry, suggesting either a police background or just a fascination with weapons. When a woman joins the Hit Team, Lam is able to draw out the sexual tension through a race to reassemble a machine gun.

I do not want to add support to claims that exaggerate the significance of homo-erotic elements in Hong Kong action cinema,⁴ but an argument can be made that although there is little attention given to the development of a heterosexual romantic bond in "Hit Team," Lam devotes careful attention to some male bonding scenes in ways reminiscent of his romances. The closeness of the team of rogue cops is developed during a rugby match that receives more careful attention to camera setups than the pivotal action sequences. The game is the most carefully constructed sequence in this cop film, perhaps because of the ready availability of a park for extended filming. Also, the rugby match is important since it serves as the only development given to crucial character attachments in the film. In this scene, Lam practices an aggressive filming technique that would be at home in 3-D cinema. He likes to push the action in a straight line towards the viewer. During the Rugby match a ball comes right at the camera in a similar, but less forceful, manner to the baton in an early scene in "Option Zero". Through constructive editing, he builds up the spatial relationships of the match. A shot shows a glance left before the pass. He cuts into the line of the ball, cuts to a catch, and then to the receiver's glance right. Not only does Lam like to lob objects at the camera, he throws people in its direction. Harkening back to Leone's "For a Few Dollars More" (1965) when Van Cleef's first victim falls face-first into the dirt in front of a low-angled camera, Lam's rugby cop dives to the in-zone, smashing the ball in front of the camera. This scene is an excellent example of Lam's attempt to give an expressive impact to intimacy, though it atypically lacks women.

There are a few tell-tale elements that mark this as a Lam production. Most importantly, he likes to film in the rain, as a watery sheen smoothes out dusty surfaces and adds to the characteristic glossy look of his films. If rain is not available, i.e. if the action indoors, Lam will cleverly turn on fire sprinklers. In an early action sequence in "Option Zero" the sprinklers in a hotel corridor are activated, but due to the washed out look of this film and the inconsistent lighting effects he cannot take advantage of the sheen. By far, the best use of rain is in "Jiang Hu" where an umbrella gets 3/4 of the frame, so that blue neon light can shine through rain drops sliding down black plastic. In "Hit Team" Lam uses sprinklers during an attack on an "underground bank." The effect is a high gloss on the black gear worn by the techno-rouge cops. "Hit Team" takes Lam's preoccupation with gloss, beautiful men, and big guns to its purest extreme, and the budding romantic sub plots stagnate.

There is a characteristic glossiness of all of Lam's films: his camera loves to frame the rich tones of beautiful faces. "Beast Cops" is an exception to the luster typical of Lam's films, taking its influence from Wong Kar-Wai's fuzzy, blue filtered violence in "As Tears Go By" (1988). Lam includes several references to Wong in the final fight scene. Fluorescent lamps bleach out the color making the shattering pan in the café fight scene in "Tears" resemble an explosion of light. With a similar effect, in "Beast Cops" Anthony Wong's character is hit over the head with a fluorescent bulb. Pushy Pin uses the same tubular fluorescent bulb as a sword that he thrusts directly toward Wong's face. A quick side-step results

in a face-scraping near-miss reminiscent of an early shot in the opening fight in the international version of "Ashes of Time" (Wong Kar-wai, 1995).

As with "Runaway" (2001), in "Beast Cops" Anthony Wong plays a man hopelessly in love, whose feelings are unreciprocated. The climax comes when Leung (Anthony Wong) descends into hell to confront the devil, Pushy Pin, who he can destroy only by becoming a bloody monster. After murdering Big Brother Fai (Roy Cheung), Pushy Pin goes to an underground casino to wait for Leung's inevitable retaliation. In route to the final confrontation, Wong sees his lover with another man, the revelation and accompanying anger provides his motivation to participate in an amphetamine-fueled hatchet massacre.

More important to the aesthetics of action than cluttering up gunfights with handheld cameras and continuity errors, Lam develops a visceral technique of presenting violence that he uses with some success in "Beast Cops." Lam references Anthony Wong's horror cache in the violent finale of "Beast Cops." Wong plays a similar character with a similar sounding name in a similarly titled movie, "Rock 'n Roll Cop" (Kirk Wong, 1994). During the ferocious fight at the end of "Rock 'N Roll Cop," a vicious gangster tries to free his partner, who is handcuffed to Wong by chopping off his arm with a butcher knife. Lam too effectively uses knives to draw out the visceral character of the violence, a technique he employs in service of romance in "Jiang Hu." The two major fight scenes in "Beast Cops" extend the horror motif through Lam's choice of weapons. In the first major battle, Michael Wong's character is attacked by a group of triads equipped with butcher knives and cleavers. The scene opens

when a knife comes from the left of the frame, slicing into the arm of a street vendor standing next to Michael -- a reference to the street battle in "Rock 'N Roll Cop." The vendor falls, Michael turns to run, and the triads hack and slash as he scrambles to get away.

Using cleavers in the crucial action sequences is an important innovation in action cinema that increases the effectiveness of on-screen violence on the viewer. Lam draws on horror films to revise the action of swordplay, and his experiment proves successful. In an interview included on the *Deep Red* DVD put out by Anchor Bay, Italian horror director Dario Argento describes how he tries to confine displays of pain to common experiences, thus evoking more visceral reactions from viewers. Rarely will he have a character shot by a gun, since few of us know what it is like to be shot; rather, his victims are usually either stabbed or, what is more likely, cut by a broken window. Like Argento, in his most effective films Lam forgets the guns and gives the action familiar sources of violence against the fleshy, vulnerable areas of our bodies.

In discussing cause and effect relations, philosopher David Hume comments that "if we think of a wound, we can scarcely forbear reflecting on the pain which follows it." We all know what it is like to bump our heads against a sharp table-edge and to hit our teeth on a drinking-glass. The effectiveness of exaggerating commonly experienced pain relies on some sort of psycho-physiological memory of cause and effect. It is not that we do not believe that getting shot hurts, but we probably *know* what it is like to get cut, be it from a small cooking knife or broken glass. We have some sort of "physical memory"

that is sparked by visualization and this makes these actions more emotionally provocative. When the familiar kitchen cleaver comes out, the audience knows what it is like to nick a finger and it is hard not to image the danger the cleaver poses to our necks and abdomens. In discussing the violence in "Beast Cops," co-director Gordon Chan says that "There are two ways to present violence; one is to shock and the other is to make the audience go 'Yeah!' I decided to shock them. It's even better if it disgusts them. I want to make them uncomfortable" (Chan, 1998:75).

Initiating the gruesome finale to "Beast Cops," Pushy Pin berries a cleaver into Big Brother's neck. The longest butcher knife battle in all of Lam's films, the finale unfortunately degrades to the level of a Tarantino inspired student film. An emaciated surf guitar soundtrack drains the energy from the death match, thus hindering the scene's effectiveness. Comic book freeze frames try to sustain unearned emotional peaks without proper musical emphasis, and the effort falls flat. Before the surf guitar begins, a similar sound-image mismatch muddles the action. The percussive editing of a gunfight and the note-to-note liaisons of a saxophone score do not serve as an effective juxtaposition. As such, the violence of the finale is diffused rather than intensified by the music.⁵

In "Beast Cops" Lam figures out that the gut is the most vulnerable area of the body -- when attacked it is sure to elicit horror. Anthony Wong's character is stabbed in the stomach several times in the course of the action. His ability to sustain repeated attacks to his fleshy middle is due to a protective stomach guard, which when removed allows for another round of stomach stabbing.

Before finally shoving a broken glass into Wong's kidneys, Pushy Pin grinds it into his own navel, making the viewer squirm in discomfort.

Lam's discovery of the efficacy of endangering vulnerable flesh with common kitchen instruments is a crucial ingredient in his development of Hong Kong romance. The viewer readily understands the danger involved in clever fights, and audience sympathies are easily forthcoming. The cringing, queasy, unease created from this kind of violence is a surprisingly effective audience tenderizer, prepping viewers for the development of emotion tugging romance.

Romance, Stars, and Ghosts

The sophisticated integration of violence and romance found in "Jiang Hu" is unmatched in Lam's films before and since, although "When I look Upon the Stars" and "Runaway" explore similar romantic themes with some success. "Stars" is Lam's best primarily romance-driven film. Lam's his shot compositions are more carefully framed and his shot-to-shot constructions are more precisely matched in the pivotal, intimate movements in "Stars" than they are in most of the action sequences in his early films. "Runaway" is less significant but it continues some of Lam's relationship themes. Before discussing these two films, we will briefly look at the failures of Lam's sentimentality when fed too much CGI.

"Tiramasu" (2002) is Lam's flimsiest film, though it might work for an audience of teenage girls for whom the scenario – one in which a girl can be allowed to return from the dead in order to participate in a dance competition because her boyfriend loves her enough to sacrifice himself -- might sound

plausible. The story is so ridiculous one can only assume that Lam, who carries writing credit, is pushing the genre conventions to their absolute limit while having a little fun with naïve optimism. Essentially, he constructs a story driven solely by wishful thinking.

Fung (Nichola Tse) is a messenger who in route to deliver a letter to a dance studio, happens to board a subway and sit next to Jane (Karena Lam), who is a student at that very same dance studio! In the morning rush hour, Fung sympathetically helps Jane avoid an obnoxious passenger. At lunch he passes her in the street, and during the evening rush hour he is pushed by the random hand of fate, with the help of a crushing crowd, to within mere inches of her as they ride home on the subway. Never having spoken and unable to find Jane on subsequent days, Fung luckily recognizes the dance studio from a photograph he finds in a picture book of fruit that Jane dropped during their intense ride home. Twenty-one minutes into the movie, Jane is killed by a car accident, but she is able to avoid leaving for the underworld because of her metaphysical chain of love with Fung: at the moment of her death, Fung thought of her, and she of him, and as usually happens in this kind of situation, he is able to see her ghost. This works out well for the two, as they are able to develop a relationship, take some Polaroids on the rooftop, make tiramisu to help Fung's heart-broken roommate, allow the normally deaf Fung to hear and play an old song for dear friends, and train for and compete in a dance competition.

The romance is thwarted when Jane is no longer able to avoid the underworld cops -- medieval knights that appear from a CGI wavy-mirror porthole

to go on missions to hunt down runaway ghosts. An underworld cop shoots Jane with a magic arrow -- the kind that forces ghosts to return to the Versailles of the underworld where they must await re-incarnation under the careful watch of a white CGI flying dragon. Fung is able to penetrate the castle and rescue Jane, though the underworld cops pursue the pair across a field and over a ravine. His love for Jane stops an arrow shot by an underworld cop and she is granted a brief return to life so that she may participate in the most important event imaginable in a young woman's life – a riverdance contest. She accidentally falls during her routine, and the judges are sympathetic to her predicament – this being her last chance to dance, since she is really dead – so they allow her another winning try.

Fluffy and saccharine, just like the dessert of the title, "Tirimasu" is a reduction of Dante Lam's romantic themes to absurdity. Beyond providing character motivation, love can provide escape from death for such mundane tasks as dance competitions. Not only can love redeem gangsters, as it does in "Runaway," "Jiang Hu," and "Beast Cops," it can make a girl's dreams come true.

Like other Hong Kong filmmakers, Lam creates genre *mélanges* that are not strictly classified by stable categories. Most of Lam's films, with the exception of "Hit Team", have significant romantic story lines. Even in "Hit Team," the primary source of character motivation comes from intimacy. "Runaway" is no exception. Although it starts out as something of a triad comedy, it becomes a romantic comedy populated by local Hong Kong stars who seem to be having a genuinely good time on location in Thailand. A couple of trickster triads played

by Nick Cheung and Lam regular Samuel Pang playfully switch some numbers for a fixed horse race and a boss ends up losing a bet. With \$200,000 in cash collected on an earlier assignment, the petty gangsters decide to go to Thailand until things cool off. The island turns out to be run by gangsters, cannibals, and con men that rival the corruption of the two triads. There are some good gags, such as a Hong Kong boss who tries to make a threatening video of himself bathed in a red light in a smoke-filled room, but accidentally ends up killing his pet bird by smoke inhalation in the process. Overall, the film is an uninspired local star vehicle, which looks like a financed vacation for the actors.

Though Lam's protagonists are devoid of cynicism, his films are not as naive as the cover art may suggest. He presents a world where sacrifice in service of love redeems, but fools still get milked and the fragile get hurt. Each gangster who comes to the island ends up staying and falling in love, even if it means taking a crummy tourist industry job. Ray (Anthony Wong) has a mistress on the island who is hired by his wife to try and steal a voice-command key – "I love you" -- in order to unlock his safe. Wong's character suffers from the problems of unrequited love, just as in "Beast Cops" and he is in a marriage even worse than the one in "G4". Ray proves himself by doing a strip tease in a gay bar and bungee jumping, and in the end things work out for him and his con-artist mistress. The other characters are redeemed in a similar fashion when they learn what "feeling" is by bungee jumping which allows them to find their love interests more compelling than the triads. Thematically "Runaway" is in line with

Lam's other films, though as a minor vacation comedy it lacks comparable emotional impact.

After making "G4" and then "Beast Cops," Lam turned to a more straightforward romance in "When I Look Upon the Stars" (1999), one of his best films. Like "Runaway" the story emphasizes the value of intense passion over friendship and loyalty in the lives of characters entering early adulthood. The story centers around the love interests of Aeroplane Kei (Leo Koo), a young man visiting his girlfriend June (Anita Chan) and best friend Sam (Sam Lee) who live in Tokyo. During his 6 month absence, June and Sam fall in love, but are unsure of how to tell Aeroplane. The truth comes out and a depressed Aeroplane wanders off to a cafe to mope. Fortunately for Aeroplane, a young model named Kiki (Shu Qi) who works at the café likes to comfort the depressed. In an effort to get Aeroplane's mind off June, Kiki suggest that they act as if they are a couple for 24 hours. During the course of the day the couple come to like each other, but their budding romance is thwarted by a coincidental sighting of Sam and June on a date. Unaware of his feelings for Kiki, Aeroplane returns to Hong Kong and finds his boss deeply upset over leaving his mistress. He takes this as an object lesson, and immediately returns to Tokyo to look for Kiki. After an intense game of cat and mouse in a market, he finds her and they embrace.

Lam is far more precise in constructing the key scenes of intimacy in "Stars" than he is in the pure action sequences in any of his cop movies. He cleverly unites Hong Kong action with romance in "When I look Upon the Stars" and adopts the replay technique typically found in John Woo's action films,

putting it to use in order to emphasize compassion rather than brutality. In a key scene in the middle of the movie, Kei approaches June on a crowded street. Lam moves from a medium shot of Kei from behind with his arms outstretched, to a medium shot from behind June. A split second of the embrace is repeated in the cut, only to be followed by a repetition of the middle of the hug from a slightly different angle to the left. The overlapping action taken from three slightly different angles on a quarter circle drawn around June, lends a weeping, unstable intensity to the hug. Throughout the film, Lam uses similar clockwise whirls as a metaphor for the spinning intensity of romantic love. In the final shot the metaphor is made most explicit: when Kei and Kiki find each other in the crowd and reunite through a kiss, Lam pulls the camera up and around the actors until it rotates directly above the couple, expressing their dizziness of their love.

Lam takes most care in constructing pivotal romantic moments. Although his action scenes are generally cluttered and rough, when characters fall in love Lam gives clear emphasis to their feelings. In "When I look Upon the Stars," after playing at a "relationship" all day, Kei and Kiki accidentally run into June and Sam. Kei and Kiki become estranged by his jealousy-induced depression. Back at Kiki's apartment, they sit facing away from each other. The psychological distance between them is expressed in their physical distance, which is shown in an establishing shot. Both distances are collapsed in a series of reaction shots. As Kei begins to reveal his feelings for Kiki, we see the play of a smile on her face. As conversation progresses, they gradually come together both in the story and in the frame, but not in space. In four steps, the shots

become increasingly closer, until the final close-up of Kiki consumes most of the space Kei occupied in the previous composition. With Kiki in an extremely tight Bergman close-up, Kei pessimistically brings up the failure of his previous relationship and when he returns to the foreground with the next cut, the camera is back in the original position with four steps between them. Kiki kills the seriousness by closing the gap with a friendly gesture. Shelly Kraicer comments that the film's "dazzling, playful editing" stands out. She is right, Lam's visual creativity is greatest when put in service of the expression of intimacy.

Action in the Service of Romance

In "Jiang Hu: The Triad Zone" (2000) Lam discovers what effective romance should look like in the action-focused tradition of Hong Kong cinema.⁶ "Jiang Hu" is a sophisticated anti-triad comedy that integrates Lam's emphasis on love with genre commentary and the visceral impact of clever violence. Like "Beast Cops," "Jiang Hu" is heavily indebted to recent Hong Kong cinema, especially Johnnie To's "The Mission" -- even going so far as to pull characters out of other movies. Unquestionably, this is the best of Lam's films and it excels in the genre hybridizations characteristic of Hong Kong cinema by bringing together the most effective elements of his previous work.

After a failed assassination attempt, triad boss Jimmy Yam (Tony Leung Ka-fai) reflects upon the relationships he has with his close friends. Through voice over narration and flashbacks, we learn about Yam's bodyguards of past and present, his right hand man, his wife, and his lover. Rather than play Tsui

Hark to John Woo and put female leads into male roles, Lam changes the basis of character relationships by modifying the typical hierarchy of values. The relationships of importance in the film are based on romantic love, not loyalty or business partnerships; however, "Jiang Hu" both laments and ushers on the death of loyalty as a worthy basis for a relationship. After his current body guard is injured, feelings of guilt motivate Yam to visit his previous body guard (played by Eric Tsang Chi-Wai), who has been sitting in prison for years without a visit from his boss. We learn that the other inmates call him a fool for staying loyal to Yam, for whom he is serving time. The absurdity of his loyalty is confirmed by the expression of his fanatic devotion: he is unwaveringly grateful for his boss's visitation, but Yam is slightly frightened by his reception.

Yam's current bodyguard Yue (Roy Cheung) is heavily indebted to a similar character Cheung plays in To's "The Mission" (1999). Rather than a strict continuation of the character who was an excellent marksman, in "Jiang Hu" Yue has new powers: he can react faster than bullets and can pinpoint snipers from blocks away. Yue has numerous metal plates in his body from previous soccer related injuries, which according to Yam help him stop bullets. Yue's loyalty to Yam is one of the few valuable relationships in the film. During the beautifully filmed assassination attempt on Yam's life, Yue protects him from the masked killers by taking several bullets. In a John Woo-inspired pause set in the midst of the action, rather than via the passing of meaningful looks, Yue confesses to having always loved his boss. Not only is this touching scene simultaneously an incredibly funny spoof on Woo, it supports the film's attack on brotherly loyalty.

Like Tiger in the climax, Yam survives not because of old-fashioned loyalty, but because of self-sacrifice motivated by romantic love.

The fight between Tiger and Yam brings together the visceral technique of violence presentation Lam honed in "Beast Cops", with the insight that action editing techniques could be used for intimate moments (as we saw in "When I look Upon the Stars"). The fight scene is structured to pull the viewer in conflicting directions by eliciting seemingly contradictory emotions. Yam and his wife Sophie (Sandra Ng) are eating dinner shortly after she finds out that he had a mistress for the past few years. As such, the tone of this sequence is serious and somewhat unlike the rest of the film. Contrite, Yam suggests that they travel back to England to revisit the place of their meeting and to rekindle their romance.

Tiger and his girlfriend are a second couple that create the central conflict driving the scene's action. Tiger wants to both get back at Yam for not giving him a job and get him out of the way, so that he can take over disputed territory. While Yam and Sophie are eating, Tiger and his girlfriend arrive downstairs by moped. They passionately kiss and he tells her to wait for him down the street. Tiger goes after Yam's bodyguards with a cleaver, but is overpowered and stabbed in the stomach with a punching blade. Tiger's girlfriend gets involved in the tussle and saves his life. Lam employs a technique similar to that which Steven Prince finds in Peckinpah: he draws sympathy for the victims of violence by focusing on the reactions of horrified characters (Prince 1998). Since Tiger is not an entirely unlikable character in the film, his girlfriend's fear makes the

viewer feel concern for his well-being. When Yam comes downstairs and Tiger charges, we have conflicting sympathies. Lam mixes the emotional confusion with the uneasy feeling one gets from seeing a group of people being slashed to bits and having holes punched into their stomachs. By alternating disgust and relief, he sets the stage for a new kind of poetic violence that mixes blood and tears.

When Tiger goes after Yam, the musical tone shifts from the aggressive bass-heavy music heard during the attack on the guards to a sound expressive of romantic longing. Rather than make the same mistakes of "Beast Cops" by combining aggressive music with smooth transitions in contrast to images of percussive violence, in "Jiang Hu" the music draws out the fluid aspects of Tiger's criss-cross chopping movements. The love song pushes the scene dangerously close to melodrama, but it serves to indicate what is at stake when Yam and Sophie run hand in hand, losing ground to Tiger. Even though the tone and imagery clash in subject matter, the musical accompaniment in "Jiang Hu" is far more effective at matching the underlying character of the violence, thus helping to orient the viewer emotionally.

Lam does not try to hold constant the precise emotion that one feels in response to lovers in danger. In the midst of the fight, he cuts to a parallel conflict between Sophie and Tiger's girlfriend. Sophie reaches for a pipe to help Yam, just as Tiger's girlfriend had done a few minutes before; however, by putting a knife to her throat, Tiger's girlfriend stops Sophie from offering assistance. To relax the emotional charge and avoid melodrama, Lam puts

some comedy into the fight, when Tiger's girlfriend asks Sophie who designed her jacket.

The final fight scene between Tiger and Jimmy Yam serves as a metaphor for the Yam's conflicting desires for the jiang hu life and his desire to revive neglected marital ties. Tiger's girlfriend's self-sacrificing gesture, offering herself in exchange for Tiger's life, redeems him in Yam's eyes. Yam asks, "Do you love him that much?" She responds by asking, "What are you saying." With his cleaver Tiger also brings redemption to Jimmy, allowing him to serve penitence for wronging Sophie. Though mutilated by Tiger's hatchet swipes and nearly killed by a final jab, Yam calls off his men, allowing his attacker to survive. In walking away from the fight, Yam and his wife re-unite and Tiger and his girlfriend are temporarily separated by the fatigued paralysis of their thrashings. Two contradictory emotions are provoked as the longing of one couple is satisfied by the other's union.

At the end of the film, Yam and his wife return to London in order to rekindle their relationship in the city of their first meeting. As a surprise for his wife, Yam bought the building where they used to live. He concedes to the outlay of a few million to fix it up and decides that they should remain there for a while. At the very same moment, Lam shows us the couple through a sniper's sight in a cynical, somewhat unmotivated, comment on the triads. It is as if Lam is saying that one cannot escape the violence of jiang hu, which destroys even that which is most valuable -- romantic love.

"Jiang Hu" combines the action of Lam's best cop films with the romance from his best romantic comedies. It successfully integrates the most effective elements of his previous two films – visceral violence from "Beast Cops" and romantic character development from "When I Look Upon the Stars." Since working on "Jiang Hu," Lam has made "purer" genre films, such as "Hit Team", a pure techno cop film with little romance, and "Tiramisu", a pure ghost romance with very little action. However, his creativity lies in combining the best techniques in genres that usually serve different emotional goals. Hopefully, he will return to probing the creative synergy of action and romance that make "Jiang Hu" a success.

Conclusion

Dante Lam's career has been an exploration of the optimal ways in which to present romantic love within Hong Kong cinema. His best work integrates action, comedy and romance with extensive references to the local tradition of filmmaking. In his films leading up to "Jiang Hu," Lam experimented with the integration of action and romance. "G4" gives an atypical amount of time to the lives of the romantic interests of the male protagonist, but the romance is not adequately developed for the finale to deliver maximum emotional impact. In "Beast Cops" Lam uses romantic failure to motivate the climax, but the action and romantic plots are only loosely connected. After abandoning the pause-burst-pause system of action presentation in "G4" and bringing horror violence to the action movie in "Beast Cops," Lam uses typical action replay techniques in

the service of romance in "When I look Upon the Stars." Having learned to develop a romantic story line, armed with a new technique for making the audience squirm, and having seen the relevance of action editing to romance, Lam was able to make "Jiang Hu." "Jiang Hu" is aware of the local cinematic tradition and, as such, is a model Hong Kong romance: it mixes action and love with genre commentary to produce a sophisticated romantic comedy with strong emotional impact.⁷

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Notes

¹ <http://filmcritics.org.hk/optionzero/review.html>

² "Love is not a Game but a Joke" also stars actress Shu Qi, who got her start in category III film in 1996 and worked on Lam's "When I look Upon the Stars" in 1999.

³ For more on the pause-burst-pause pattern see David Bordwell (2000 and 2001).

⁴ Jillian Sandell argues for the importance of male intimacy in John Woo's films, though her arguments seem to be based on what would sound most progressive, rather what explains the films. For example, the demands of interpretive honesty are clearly put aside for political expediency in comments such as: "relegating male intimacy to the realm of homosexuality offers little to challenge contemporary stereotypes about gender and sexuality" (Sandell, 1996).

⁵ For a completely different assessment of the success of the music in the finale of "Beast Cops" see Jonathan Marshall's review of heroic cinema.

⁶ Steve Erickson's review of "Jiang Hu" makes some similar points, saying that the film Lam is "synthesizing the romance and the gangster film." I've tried to make a different point and explain how certain elements of the action film is used in the service of romance (Erickson 2001).

⁷ I would like to thank David Bordwell and Jonathan Frome for useful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.