Book Review

Review of Fang, Karen. 2017. *Arresting Cinema: Surveillance in Hong Kong Film*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

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Anita Lam

York University, Canada
lamanita@yorku.ca

Karen Fang's *Arresting Cinema* provides a long overdue theoretical intervention in Surveillance Studies by 'provincializing' the existing Western bias in studies of surveillance cinema, a bias that 'resembles the landscape of Surveillance Studies—and surveillance geopolitics—itsself' (pg. 7). As Fang astutely notes in her accessibly written book, scholarly studies of surveillance cinema, including monographs by Lefait (2013) and Zimmer (2015), have tended to focus on a rather narrow geographical landscape of surveillance culture, implying through their selection of predominantly American and European movies that surveillance is an attribute limited to Western modernity. By contrast, *Arresting Cinema* argues for the exploration of surveillance films, cultures, practices and customs in post-colonial and non-Western spaces outside the Global North, such as Hong Kong. Because Hong Kong is uniquely positioned as a significant film production centre in relation to the United States and mainland China, its surveillance films serve as alternatives to both Western-centred and Chinese discourses on the practice and value of surveillance in society. Here, Fang uses Hong Kong surveillance cinema as part of a larger theoretical and methodological argument for urging surveillance scholars to consider films outside of the existing Western 'canon' of predominantly English-language surveillance films centred on white bodies.¹ Yet she also considers Hong Kong cinema as a regional film culture with its own local film traditions. Treating surveillance as an enduring motif that has been tied to prevailing local, cultural concerns, Fang examines the multiple genres that make up Hong Kong surveillance cinema beyond the genres (e.g., dystopian speculative fiction) most typically associated with surveillance. In addition to espionage and crime films, surveillance themes also surface in a diverse range of unconventional genres, such as comedies, romances, gambling films, and tenement films.

Irrespective of specific genre, Fang analyzes these (primarily Cantonese-language) Hong Kong surveillance films with a nuanced historicized approach that takes into consideration the political implications of surveillance imagery. In particular, she reads Hong Kong surveillance films as a challenge to Chinese soft power, a term that has been used since the mid-2000s to describe 'Chinese aspirations to

¹ In the list of 64 surveillance feature films compiled by Dietmar Kammerer and made available online by the Surveillance Studies Network (see <http://www.surveillance-studies.net/?p=310>), 46 of those films were made in the USA, 8 in the UK, and 10 in continental Europe. No films listed in this 'essential surveillance filmography' (Murakami Wood 2014: footnote 1) were produced outside the Global North.

the global influence once associated with American hegemony' (pg. xi). Not only is surveillance itself an implicit factor in soft power but so, too, are its filmic images. Consequently, Hong Kong surveillance cinema can be divided into films made during its existence as a British colony (i.e., before 1997) and ones made after its reunification with China. To capture the feelings and concerns evoked in a populace that has served two political masters without ever having gained self-rule, films about undercover policing and covert operations have acquired special significance in Hong Kong, precisely because the genre's themes of conflicting identities mirror the region's unique political history. Films, such as *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), associate surveillance, in terms of both human and technological resources, with Hong Kong's capacity to protect itself from mainland Chinese intruders. In reunification-era films made during the lead-up to Hong Kong's handover to China in 1997, Hong Kong itself is not only envisioned as a wealthy capitalist enclave, but its surveillance practices are positively associated with the territory's continued prosperity and local autonomy. However, films made during this era, especially in the aftermath of the 1989 crackdown on protestors in Tiananmen Square, represent the surveillance practices of mainland China through images of violence and disorder, connecting them to totalitarian regimes and associating them with anti-communist, Sinophobic sensibilities. Even in post-reunification, contemporary Hong Kong cinema (i.e., films made after 2000), surveillance appears as a distinguishing feature. While big-budget, visually spectacular and epic martial arts (*wuxia*) films were being produced in China's surveillance state, Hong Kong was producing accessible films centred on undercover policing and covert surveillance. Using the Hong Kong and mainland versions of the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy (2002-2003) as examples, Fang turns to an analysis of (self-) censorship and other forms of artistic catering to centralized (Chinese) power, highlighting an area that could be better explored in Surveillance Studies. While the issue of censorship has been an established topic in film history, it remains under-researched as a surveillance policy (the surveillance and sorting of films themselves) that can substantially impact the extradiegetic context of film production and reception, as well as shape film narratives and images.

As much as Hong Kong cinema has provided an alternative aesthetic to mainland Chinese cinema, it has also used surveillance motifs to carve out a place for itself on the world stage, directly engaging with Hollywood films. In comparison to Hollywood films, Hong Kong surveillance cinema offers a unique view of surveillance aesthetics and ethics, diverging from typical representations of voyeurism and panopticism. In general, Hollywood surveillance films usually portray spatial, social and data monitoring through a highly suspicious lens, representing these forms of scrutiny as perverse, violent, intrusive and repressive. Instead, Hong Kong surveillance cinema tends to reveal and revel in the pleasure and play of looking rather than limit itself to evoking fear and paranoia. Not only do these films represent a more diffuse, decentralized and lateral gaze of surveillance (pg. 28), they also depict surveillance as a practical opportunity for upward mobility, personal profit and personal enjoyment. While Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954)—a thriller often used as *the example par excellence* by film critics for theorizing and criticizing voyeurism (e.g., Denzin 1995; Mulvey 1975)—encapsulates the fear that 'we're becoming a race of Peeping Toms', its Hong Kong remake, *Backyard Adventures* (1955), does not include such an anxious condemnation of 'rear window ethics'. No longer tying visual observation to criminal discovery (the movie notably abandons the murder mystery at the heart of Hitchcock's thriller), the Hong Kong film playfully turns surveillance into a voyeuristic and imaginative adventure with which to pass the time. Remarkably, Hong Kong cinema also replays images of discipline and punishment with humour. For instance, *The House of 72 Tenants* (1973), a Hong Kong tenement film, associates freeze frames with multiplicity, comedy, and the domesticated uses of surveillance, departing from the deployment of freeze frames in Hollywood films. While *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), for example, ends with an iconic freeze frame, cinematographically arresting the criminal outlaws and aligning aggressive surveillance with establishment authority, the Shaw Brothers classic uses freeze frames in multiple ways, from introducing new characters and underscoring punch lines to visually prolonging moments in which perpetrators are arrested for committing unethical acts.

Imagining and imaging surveillance in its diverse uses and multiple forms, Hong Kong cinema, as Fang argues, makes sense as a quintessentially local and ethnographic glimpse of Hong Kong culture. Because Hong Kong cinema tends to figure surveillance as a metonym for local identity, Hong Kong culture is at its core a surveillance culture. To follow Fang's argument, however, one has to assume that Hong Kong cinema's surveillance images are primarily unmediated reflections of the culture that makes and consumes them. Yet in tension with this assumption, Fang (pgs. 131-2) also argues that Hong Kong surveillance films are 'self-conscious artistic and aspirational expressions by which the cinema asserts its place within world culture and global modernity'. As such, it seems to me that these films—with their carefully crafted and mediated images of surveillance—contribute to the production, and not just the mere reflection, of both local and global surveillance cultures. It is this latter argument that could have been made more strongly and fleshed out in Fang's monograph, especially as she traces a cycle of crime films that were made in partnership with the Hong Kong Police. To understand these films, Fang (pg. 98) suggests that we 'see the fictional police protagonists as surrogates for real institutional representation, reflecting the [police] force's long history of using official and unofficial media to enhance institutional legitimacy'. Again, she makes an argument for the crime films' reflectionist properties. However, it seems to me that an equally compelling argument could be made that these films create an artistic or cinematographic vocabulary² that helps to support the local surveillance culture with its attendant policing initiatives, explaining in part why Hong Kong has such a uniquely affirmative surveillance culture. Such an argument would align well with the conclusions found in Aaron Doyle's *Arresting Images* (2003). Taking an institutional approach, Doyle argued that powerful institutions, such as the police, control the nature and form of media influence, providing both authorized interpretations and ideological visions that support the established order in society. In so doing, these institutions exert a greater influence than imagined by Fang: instead of using Hong Kong cinema as 'an intriguing example of how official institutions can survive and prosper by embedding their fate within the welfare of cinema itself' (pg. 95), we might read it as a case in which the fate of Hong Kong cinema itself is tied to the continued flourishing of policing and surveillance in society.

Consequently, such an interpretation would broaden Fang's narrower aim of analyzing the theme of surveillance in film, and push Surveillance Studies towards paying greater attention to the relationship between surveillance and the production of culture itself. In studies of surveillance culture, such as William Staples' (1997) seminal formulation, surveillance usually appears as an already-completed and manufactured cultural product (e.g., a security camera or a film) to be consumed by the masses rather than as part of a process of cultural production. Surveillance culture is also often conceptualized as a participatory culture, in which consumers can become producers through emerging surveillance and audiovisual technologies (e.g., smartphone cameras and webcams). However, in Hollywood and Hong Kong filmmaking, the traditional separation between producers and consumers remains in a culture of production that is neither inclusive nor participatory. If cinema is one means by which surveillance becomes a normalized part of our popular culture, then we ought to ask how such studio films are produced and under what conditions. How does the extradiegetic context of production, including acts of (self-)censorship, shape and potentially alter the ways that we understand surveillance and its impact on our interactions? How does surveillance become an exportable theme in cinema, enabling surveillance films, such as those from Hong Kong, to travel outside their point of origin? These questions should not arrest us in our tracks; rather, they would allow us to more fruitfully discuss the connections between the production and circulation of surveillance cinema, on one hand, and the formation and maintenance of surveillance culture, on the other.

² Many of the Hong Kong filmmakers that would come to be known as the 'New Wave' were employed at the start of their careers by the government to produce official surveillance productions, or recruitment films for the Hong Kong Police.

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