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RUNNING OUT OF TIME

暗戰 AM ZIN

CAST

Andy Lau Cheung
Lau Ching Wan Inspector Ho Sheung Sang
Yoyo Mung Leung Yuen Ting
Waise Lee Mr. Chen
Hui Shiu Hung Wong Kai Fat
Lam Suet Suet

CREW

Directed and Produced by **Johnnie To**
Written by **Yau Nai Hoi**, **Laurent Courtiaud**
and **Julien Carbon**
Cinematography by **Cheng Siu Keung**
Edited by **Andy Chan**
Music by **Raymond Wong**
Art Director **Jerome Fung**

RUNNING OUT OF TIME 2

暗戰2 AM ZIN 2

CAST

Lau Ching Wan Inspector Ho Sheung Sang

Ekin Cheng The Thief

Kelly Lin Teresa

Hui Siu Hung Wong Kai Fat

Ruby Wong Senior Police Officer

Chiu Chi Shing Loan Shark

CREW

Directed by **Law Wing Cheong** and **Johnnie To**

Written by **Yau Nai Hoi**, **Au Kin Yee** and

The Milkyway Creative Team

Cinematography by **Cheng Siu Keung**

Edited by **Yau Chi Wai** and **Law Wing Cheong**

Music by **Raymond Wong**

Art Directors **Choo Sung Pong** and **Simon So**



ON THE EDGE: CONNECTION, ISOLATION, AND IDENTITY IN *RUNNING OUT OF TIME 1 & 2*

by David West

Hong Kong cinema was in trouble in 1999. Once the powerhouse of East Asian filmmaking, the city's movie production was persistently battered by a combination of the Asian financial crisis and fears about the city's future in the wake of the 1997 handover to China. While top directors like Tsui Hark, Ringo Lam, and John Woo tried their luck working in the West, Johnnie To stood against the prevailing pessimism in Hong Kong by setting up Milkyway Image in 1996 to help keep cameras rolling and Cantonese language cinema on screens.

At that point in his career, To had already enjoyed considerable box office success with action movies like *The Heroic Trio* (*Dung fong sam hap*, 1993) but more so in his comedic collaborations with the decade's top box office attraction Stephen Chow who reigned supreme in Hong Kong thanks to his signature style of *mo lei tau* comedies. These combined sharp parodies of popular films, both local productions and those from the US, with wordplay, sight gags, and slapstick. *Justice, My Foot!* (*Sam sei goon*, 1992) was a smash hit for To and Chow, but the director seemed to want more from his career than helming nonsense comedies. To has cited King Hu, Akira Kurosawa, and Sergio Leone as influences, but his desire to make elegiac stories about gunslingers and gangsters inspired by his forebears had to be balanced against the commercial realities involved in keeping Milkyway Image afloat. His

modus operandi became one of alternating between films crafted to appeal to the proclivities of Hong Kong audiences—largely rom-coms and comedies—and more personal works that allowed him to express his own interests as a cinephile.

That's not to say Milkyway Image hit the ground running. Their earliest productions failed to set the box office alight, and while 1999's *The Mission* (*Cheung foh*) was a critical success, that didn't translate into ticket sales. *Running Out of Time*, released in Hong Kong in September 1999, was Milkyway Image's first significant hit and managed the rare feat of marrying critical acclaim with popularity. The film has many traits typical of Hong Kong cinema of the period, but at the same time there's a great deal that sets it apart.

To, like many of his contemporaries, frequently works from an outline rather than a screenplay, encouraging his actors to improvise during filming while writing and rewriting the script during production. Working to this methodology, *PTU* (2003) was filmed in short bursts over a period spanning years, and a lot of the dialogue scenes in *The Mission* are clearly improvised on the spot (not always successfully, it must be said). However, in a departure from that approach, *Running Out of Time* was written by two French film critics turned screenwriters, Laurent Courtiaud and Julien Carbon. The screenplay was done in a hurry, the first draft finished in two weeks, and inevitably there were revisions during filming, but To was working from a fully formed script for a change which helps explain why *Running Out of Time* feels more tightly plotted than the likes of *The Mission*, *Exiled* (*Fong yuk*, 2006), or *Throw Down* (*Yau doh lung fu bong*, 2004), to name but three of To's works.

The presence of Andy Lau confirms that with *Running Out of Time*, To and Milkyway Image had their eye on mainstream appeal. Lau is a superstar in Hong Kong. He started his career on television at TVB, before crossing over to music, where he ruled Cantopop as one of the Four Heavenly Kings, alongside fellow heartthrobs and chart toppers Jacky Cheung Hok-yau, Leon Lai Ming and Aaron Kwok. A 2021



article in the *South China Morning Post* lists Andy Lau's worth at US\$70 million and there was a period where he was Hong Kong's top grossing box office star, with his films outgrossing even Jackie Chan. But he wasn't popular with the critics, thanks to his appearances in low-brow crowd-pleasers like *Magic Crystal (Mo fei cui, 1986)* and *Casino Raiders (Zi zyun mou seong, 1989)* for director Wong Jing. *Running Out of Time* finally won the critics over, with Andy Lau taking Best Actor at the 19th Hong Kong Film Awards for the first time in his career.

The opening scene of *Running Out of Time* quickly establishes the central theme and motif, with Cheung (Andy Lau) on the roof of a skyscraper, looking out over the long, vertiginous drop to the ground far below. Literally and figuratively, he's a man on the edge. More than that, he's a man with no future, which positions *Running Out of Time* alongside films like Ringo Lam's *On Fire* series—*City on Fire (Lung foo fung wan, 1987)*, *Prison on Fire (Gam yuk fung wan, 1987)*, and *School on Fire (Hok hau fung wan, 1988)*—that express a profound anxiety about Hong Kong's future. *Running Out of Time* is not as fatalistic and dark as Lam's bleak films, but there's no happy ending in sight for Cheung and it's still a surprisingly cynical film. The opening bank robbery leaves at least three people dead, but Inspector Ho Sheung Sang (Lau Ching Wan) calmly walks away from the bloodshed and goes to grab a bite to eat. That's a remarkably cold-blooded reaction to a scene of carnage and it reveals a lot about Ho's personality and worldview. Ho has no family, no romantic life, and his only relationships seem to be with his colleagues in the police force. He eats all his meals by himself, is desperate for something to do at work when not occupied with a case, as there's clearly nothing else calling for his time or attention. Even Ho's relationship with his superior Wong Kai Fat (Hui Siu Hung) can't be described as a friendship, with Ho constantly berating and belittling Wong, rejecting his every attempt to establish closeness. The camerawork reinforces this sense of both Ho and Cheung being isolated, with the use of long lenses to throw the background out of focus, so even when there are shots on crowded streets, the camera separates

them from the crowds. Just like Ho, Cheung is alone in the city. There's no one to help him through his final weeks and this helps to explain the bond that he forms with the police inspector. While the film hints at the prospect of a connection between Cheung and the woman he forces to be his accomplice on the bus, Leung Yuen Ting (Yoyo Mung), that angle has little screen time and there's no consummation of that relationship. The primary bonding here is between the two men.

This angle of the story ties *Running Out of Time* to threads running back through Hong Kong cinema and the films of John Woo, Ringo Lam, and Chang Cheh. It was Chang who coined the term *yanggang*—staunch masculinity—for his male-led *wuxia* films in the 1960s and he continued in that vein through the 1970s, first with a series of movies about the folk heroes of Shaolin Temple, then the movies starring the actors known as the Venom Mob—Lo Meng, Sun Chien, Philip Kwok, Chiang Sheng, and Lu Feng. All of Chang's films deal with the bonds between men, where women are a distraction or simply absent entirely. John Woo worked as an Assistant Director for Chang and picked up the baton from his mentor. Woo's films like *Last Hurrah for Chivalry* (*Hao xia*, 1979), *A Better Tomorrow* (*Ying hung boon sik*, 1986) and its 1987 sequel, *The Killer* (*Dip huet seung hung*, 1989), and *Hard Boiled* (*Lat sau san taam*, 1992), are all centered around exclusively male relationships. When Leslie Cheung's character Kit dies in *A Better Tomorrow II*, Woo doesn't cut to the character of Kit's wife, instead he shows his brother Sung Tse Ho (Ti Lung) reacting to the news. The wife's experience of loss is ignored, it's only the man's grief that matters.

There's a common thread in Woo's films like *The Killer* and *Hard Boiled* and Ringo Lam's *City on Fire* where a bond forms between a cop and someone in the criminal underworld. In *The Killer*, hitman Jeff (Chow Yun-Fat) and Inspector Li Ying (Danny Lee) are bound by codes of honor, representing two sides of the same coin. This motif is central to *Running Out of Time*. There's no sense of active hostility between Cheung and Inspector Ho, they're not trying to kill one another, and Ho seems to relish the challenge of crossing wits with Cheung. The investigation becomes a game



between the pair that lets them get to know one another and find a rare connection in their solitary lives. As much as *Running Out of Time* is a thriller, it's equally a portrait of an unlikely friendship. While To's comedies offer more space for female characters, his thrillers comfortably fit within the *yanggang* framework, where men are firmly at the center of the story and women on the periphery if they're present at all. *The Mission, Exiled, Election* (*Hak se wooi*, 2005), *PTU*, and *Throw Down* are all stories of men, whether they're searching for their place in the world and meaning in life like *Throw Down*, or engaged in power struggles and battles for dominance like *Election* and *PTU*.

Running Out of Time is Cheung's story first and foremost, he's the protagonist and Inspector Ho the antagonist. Cheung has the more compelling arc, striving towards redemption and heroism as he leads Ho to the Triads. It makes sense that Andy Lau took the Best Actor award, not Lau Ching Wan, because Inspector Ho's arc is, comparatively, less developed. He's still the same cynical man at the story's end as he is at the start, shrugging off a pile of bodies after the botched bank robbery and choosing not to tell Leung Yuen Ting about the necklace she's wearing. Without Cheung, he returns to his detached view of the world, a man alone in the crowded city.

The sequel pushes this theme further in the connection between Inspector Ho and his new opponent, the thief played by Ekin Cheng. To had not intended to direct the sequel and shares the directing credit for *Running Out of Time 2* with Law Wing Cheong. A protégé of To's, Law worked for him as an Assistant Director at the television station TVB and has been an actor and editor over the course of his career. *Running Out of Time 2* was Law's first directorial job but it seems that To had to step in when the production started to run astray. The French writing team of Laurent Courtiaud and Julien Carbon didn't return for the follow-up to their 1999 hit. Instead, the script is credited to To's regular screenwriters Yau Nai Hoi and Au Kin Yee, and the Milkyway Creative Team, which suggests that this time the filmmakers were working without a finished script, writing as they went along. The

result is a film that's looser and untidier than the original, too often relying on motifs repeated from the first movie. One pertinent example of this looser, improvised approach is Lam Suet's character of the police negotiator who's in trouble with triads due to his gambling addiction. His scenes provide some grimly comic relief to the main plot, but as a subplot it feels superfluous to the main action and the character's arc is muddily articulated. One possible reading of Lam Suet's role is that he represents someone addicted to the thrill of risk, comparable to how both the thief and Inspector Ho enjoy their battle of wits. That said, the decision to have Lam Suet present in the scene when the thief is on the phone to Ho means that the film doesn't frame the thief as a solitary figure searching for connection in the same manner as Andy Lau's character in the original.

In the second film, Inspector Ho goes from antagonist to protagonist as Ekin Cheng's character remains largely a mystery, lacking a dimension as compelling as Cheung's race against his cancer in the first movie. Instead, the pressure here comes from Ho trying to recover the stolen treasures to avoid impeding a business merger, which is rather less emotionally compelling than a terminal illness.

From the spirited rivalry between Ho and Cheung in the first film, the sequel goes beyond a shared bond between the cop and the criminal until the dynamic between Ho and Ekin Cheng's thief becomes homoerotic. Chang Cheh's *yanggang* films in the 1970s prompted questions about both the director's intent and his own sexuality with their exclusive focus on male relationships. When Stanley Kwan asked Chang about the homoerotic overtones of his films, Chang furiously rebuked Kwan, saying he was only interested in tales of brotherhood and that there was nothing else at play. But with both Chang's hypermasculine heroes and *Running Out of Time 2*, the subtext is so pronounced as to be inescapable.

In Chang's case, to take but one example, there's *Men from the Monastery* (*Shao Lin zi di*, 1974), in which Alexander Fu Sheng plays the Cantonese folk hero Fong

Sai Yuk. In one scene, he saves a young woman from a gang of Manchu thugs. She runs up to him, all puppy-eyed and brimming with gratitude, and he smacks her (playfully?) on the forehead and walks off with his arm around his male friend. In the same film, Fong Sai Yuk is portrayed as being immune to blades, but the Manchus figure out his only weakness, eventually slaying Fong by stabbing him in the anus. Despite Chang's protests, that subtext is awfully loud.

Running Out of Time 2 isn't so outré as Chang's kung fu movies, but everything about the scenes between Inspector Ho and the thief lends support to reading their relationship as being underpinned by sexual desire. There's the twinkle in the thief's eyes every time he's face to face with Ho, all the eye contact and the thief's beaming smile, yet it's the chase scene in the rain that really dials up this frisson between the pair. They move in unison, even crashing their bicycles in synchronicity, and prior to that, they're touching each other's faces. It's not far from the romance movie motif of a couple embracing in the rain.

In the final confrontation on the rooftop, Ho cuffs himself to the thief and tells him, "I won't let you go." And the thief responds with another smile. It's positively flirtatious. Compare that to the frosty, brittleness of Ho's interactions with the film's primary female character Teresa. There's no warmth in those scenes at all, and it certainly doesn't help that Kelly Lin plays the character like a moody, bad-tempered teen forever on the verge of a tantrum. The question arising out of all this is to what degree is this intentional by the film's two directors, Johnnie To and Law Wing Cheong? Neither man is associated with LGBT cinema in Hong Kong, and it's not a topic that ever seems to have been broached in interviews with To. Given that To hadn't intended to direct the sequel, perhaps he was just pushing boundaries to try to find something original or exciting in the material.

All that said, it's possible to concatenate the homoeroticism of the second film with the scene in the bowling alley in the first movie wherein Cheung cross-dresses as a

woman. It's established early on that Cheung is a master of disguise, but that alone doesn't explain why he chooses to pretend to be a woman for his meeting with Ho in the bowling alley, or why he asks the Inspector for a kiss. Ho is uncomfortable with any expression of affection from his boss Wong, rejecting him with homophobic rebukes, yet doesn't respond in the same manner to Cheung's request for a kiss. The rest of the film doesn't expand on this angle, so it's easier to dismiss it as just an unusual directorial choice, but in the wider context of Ho's personality, his lack of interest in women, and the intensity of the relationship with the thief in the second film, there's certainly an unresolved subtext present in both films that raises questions which To doesn't answer onscreen.

With *Running Out of Time* released in 1999 and the sequel in 2001, the solitary characters looking for connection and the amorphous identities of Cheung and Ekin Cheng's thief can be read as responses to post-handover anxiety in Hong Kong. Protests were held in the city every year on 1 July to mark the anniversary of the handover and to call for democratic reforms. Hong Kongers were caught between their own unique cultural identity and the looming influence of China, and questions of identity and searching for a sense of place and belonging permeate many films of the period. The *Running Out of Time* films broach the subject—what is Hong Kong if not a city running out of time to determine its own identity and future?

The search for a sense of self would be perhaps most eloquently expressed in 2002's *Infernal Affairs* (*Mou gaan dou*), Andrew Lau and Alan Mak's thriller about an undercover cop in the triads and a triad member who joins the police force. One noticeable parallel between the *Running Out of Time* films and *Infernal Affairs* is the motif of confrontations taking place on the rooftops of skyscrapers. The location immediately sets the characters apart from those on the streets below and adds an underlying sense of danger, with the bonus of being visually striking and framing the action against the distinctive Hong Kong skyline.

While *Running Out of Time 2* repeats ideas and motifs from its predecessor, it couldn't replicate the original's popular appeal. The first film took over HK\$14.6 million at the box office, but the follow-up only managed HK\$5.9 million. The muted reception to the sequel is somewhat surprising given the presence of Ekin Cheng, the star of the massively popular *Young and Dangerous* (*Goo wak chai: Yan joi gong woo*, 1996) movie series and the 1998 smash hit *The Storm Riders* (*Fung wan: Hung ba tin ha*). Cheng's fortunes would bounce back the following year with another blockbuster in *Tokyo Raiders* (*Dong jing gong lue*, 2000). Similarly, To and Milkyway Image would score major successes with the likes of the action thriller *Fulltime Killer* (*Chuen zik saat sau*, 2001), supernatural comedy *My Left Eye Sees Ghosts* (*Ngo joh ngan gin do gwai*, 2002), and To's gangland magnum opus *Election*. Looking back at the *Running Out of Time* films two decades on, inevitably some elements seem dated, particularly the crude gay jokes, yet the films articulate themes and concerns that continue to resonate in Hong Kong and further afield. The searching for connection, security, and purpose in the face of encroaching mortality ring as true now as they did at the turn of the millennium. Despite Inspector Ho's cynicism, the films assert that no man is an island, and that it is the bonds, friendships, and relationships that make any life worth living.

David West is the author of Chasing Dragons: An Introduction to The Martial Arts Film and writes about East Asian cinema for NEO Magazine.



ABOUT THE TRANSFERS

Running Out of Time and *Running Out of Time 2* are both presented in their original 1.85:1 aspect ratio with original Cantonese and Mandarin 5.1 surround soundtracks, plus English dubs (mono on the first film, 5.1 on the second). They were restored in 2K resolution from the original camera negatives by Fortune Star, who supplied these masters to Arrow Video for this Blu-ray release.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc & Booklet Produced by **Neil Snowdon and Jacob Milligan**

Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**

Technical Producer **James White**

Technical Assistant **James Percy**

QC **Aidan Doyle**

Production Coordinator **Leila El-Khalifi Hall**

Production Assistant **Samuel Thiery**

Authoring **Krisztian Gabor Petrovics**

Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**

Artwork **Lucas Peverill**

Design **Scott Saslow**

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Julien Carbon, Jonathan Clements, Laurent Courtiaud,
Frank Djeng, James Flower, Antoine Guerin, Stefan Hammond,
Yves Montmayeur, David West



AV468 / AV471