

Hollywood's empire

U.S. cinema devalues art, especially from abroad



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All the talk about America being a great "melting pot" always fades from my view each time I go to the movies. I saw "The Corrupter" last weekend and enjoyed watching Chow Yun-Fat in a less than stellar film, and it was with a bit of resentment that I realized the film industry is giving a lot of people the shaft.

To understand where all this begins, you have to realize I have a fascination with Hong Kong cinema. Great directors like Ringo Lam, Wong Jing, Wong Kar-Wai, Tsui Hark and Wai Ka Fai are virtual unknowns here (the only exception is John Woo, who really broke mainstream with his third U.S. film, "Face/Off") and they've made some of the best films I've seen over the last few years.

Many of the directors have tried here, but it seems like every Hong Kong director who wants to try his or her hand in Hollywood has to direct a Jean-Claude Van Damme film. It's kind of like the penalty that's required. John Woo did "Hard Target" and stuck around to do better; Ringo Lam did "Maximum Risk" and went back to Hong Kong to make more (and better) films there; Tsui Hark's even done two, "Double Team" and "Knock Off," and whether or not he'll get back to making good films here or elsewhere is anyone's guess.

Let's get back to Woo for a second. When he directed "Hard Target," he became the first Asian director to make a major Hollywood film. Ever. Surely, you're thinking, it was just an oversight.

Another category, then. How about actors? Name the first leading actor of Asian descent. I'll give you a clue - he's a martial arts legend.

So, after Bruce Lee, who was next? Jackie

Chan. See a pattern forming? Finally, legendary actor Chow Yun-Fat was brought over, and people thought, okay, maybe the times they are a-changin'. Then again ... maybe not.

I need to set a few things straight before I continue my ranting and raving. I've seen more than a dozen films from Hong Kong starring Chow Yun-Fat, and I can honestly say that every bit of praise I throw onto the man just isn't enough. He's played gangster and cop, gambler king and convict slummer, and in all of them he's done admirably.

But Chow Yun-Fat wasn't brought over for his intense performance in Ringo Lam's gritty crime-drama "Full Contact," nor his chameleonic turn in Wong Jing's "God of Gamblers" as gambling king turned idiot savant and back, nor his comic wit in Woo's caper comedy "Once a Thief."

He was brought over because people in Hollywood thought he would be a good action star.

Sigh. While it is true that many of Chow Yun-Fat's best-known performances have him shooting an insanely large amount of people with a gun in each hand, I can assure you he is capable of so very, very much more than the bones he's been thrown.

He's capable of anything he can get his hands on. His next role is reported to be the King of Siam, which I'm sure he'll pull off admirably. After that, rumors indicate he will once again pair up with John Woo to do a film called "King's Ransom."

Much to the surprise of many, "King's Ransom" will be an action-comedy-heist film in the vein of "Once a Thief," and I couldn't be happier about it. "Once a Thief" is my favorite of Woo's films (although "Hard Boiled" comes in an incredibly close second) and I think it will be a nice break for Woo, who is

working on "Mission: Impossible 2" right now.

Meanwhile, the other Hong Kong directors who have come over have either gone back or gotten stuck doing Van Damme film after Van Damme film. Nothing against the guy, but it just ain't art, y'know?

It all comes down to the money vs. art argument that's been rehashed a few thousand times. For the record, I think art and entertainment are often two separate things and just because something is one doesn't mean it has to be the other.

If you were to ask the studio heads why they don't lure more of the A-list Hong Kong actors and directors to big projects, they'd cite a couple of reasons that would most likely be wrong or just plain weak.

The first and most common is that "people don't identify with them." Executives will pull out piles of demographics and research to support them, but in the end, a lot of those numbers just prove what we already know - Hollywood hasn't given them a chance.

Another is the language barrier that those coming over from Hong Kong face, but this, in time, can be overcome. In Yun-Fat's first U.S. film, "The Replacement Killers," his English wasn't great. In "The Corrupter," it has gotten much better and so has his performance. This problem can be overcome.

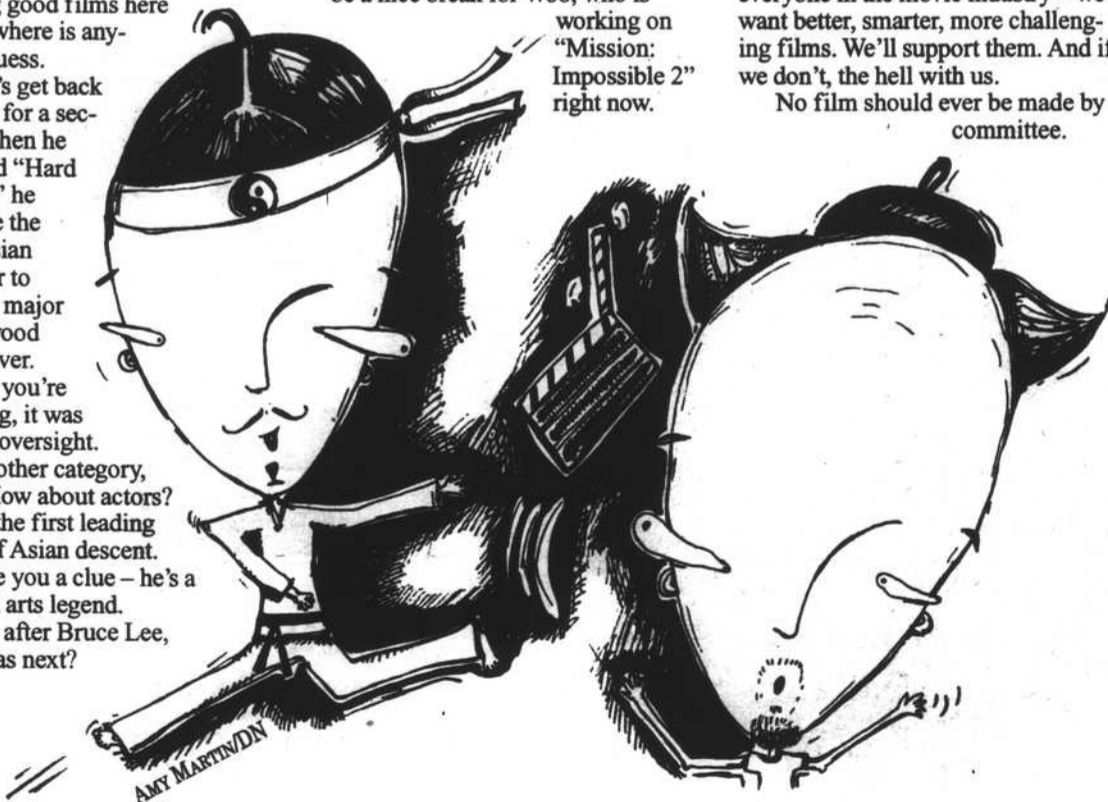
Like the big merger with all the music companies, all the little art films are continuing to be crushed in the name of big business.

Good films, good music, it's all going away all too fast.

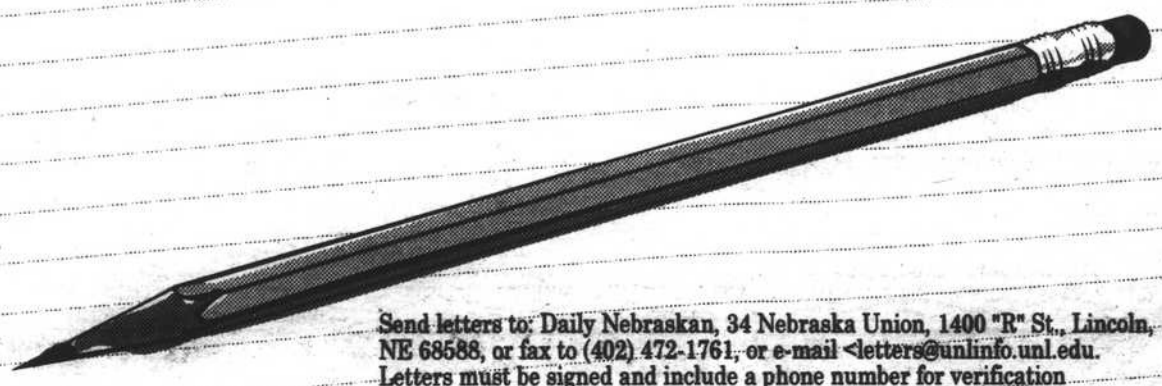
We need a new revolution. We need 100 directors making a few thousand-dollar films with the intensity of "Pi." We need actors from all walks of life, from the streets of Hong Kong, the reservations of America and more. We need our revolution now.

So consider this a challenge to everyone in the movie industry - we want better, smarter, more challenging films. We'll support them. And if we don't, the hell with us.

No film should ever be made by committee.



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