

Senses of Cinema



& *Day in the Life* (Karrabing Film Collective)

Collective Heroes: Activism and Activation at the International Film Festival Rotterdam

Tara Judah # April 2020 \$ Festival Reports % Issue 94

I soon stomp into another darkened room and another living history; the world premiere of Evans Chan's *We Have Boots* (2020). At the time of its premiere, protests in Hong Kong have been ongoing for seven months. Though I am of course aware of the protests, I have missed the finer points and key figures; I have a seven month-old son. *We Have Boots* is one hell of a way to catch up.

Chan masterfully captures both the frontline of the protests, including interviews with its key proponents, and the online aesthetic of a story that has played out in a mediated and perhaps even unreal way for the rest of the world. Using a range of colours and fonts, but most notably bright red and lurid green, the written text of the film is always a noticeably present and artificial

addition to the onscreen action. In this way, Chan simultaneously participates in and comments on the lens through which we receive such information. The footage itself is a veritable mixed bag; professionally captured for the project, news reports, social media posts, comments and camera phone footage.

The film is filled with impassioned individuals of the Umbrella Movement, many of whom were incarcerated for their efforts, including: Student Leader Alex Chow Yong-kang, Associate Professor of Law Benny Tai, and social worker and activist Shiu Ka-chun, who says “To be in prison can be performing a duty.” Along with the rise of the movement and its key figures, the perception of their motivations and their own reflections – both as they unfold and with small windows of retrospect – and popular and media coverage, the film also looks at the impact of youth alienation, conflict with mainland China, HK as the ninth most unequal place in the world (the most expensive home in the world is a four bed house in HK, marketed at \$446 million) and the mental health implications of social and political righteousness – at any cost.

And why not? When political paradoxes leave individuals behind, any cost is all there is. It might be said that it’s “One country, two systems” but the truth is that the UK Government doesn’t help if you’re imprisoned in China. Similarly, a certain type of Hong Kong cinema has become popular overseas – from the Shaw Brothers to John Woo, who’s now been co-opted by Hollywood – but some topics are left more than well alone. Introducing the film, Chan talked about the many “Umbrella films” that have been made since 2015 and how they have not been deemed important in an international arena, specifically that, “American festivals haven’t touched them yet.”

Democracy, Chan tells us, is a shield against corruption, and not much else. The people “fight pragmatically for the impossible” as the film forces us to contemplate what constitutes acceptable or tolerable inequality. Chan finds fatalism depressing but, in the face of an always asymmetrical power relationship, “by any means necessary” is at least an understandable position.

One masked and audio-distorted individual tells us that he doesn’t ever expect to have money or children, “Despair has haunted me for years.” For him, an opportunity to fight, revolt, just to attempt something, is more like living that continuing in a country where the future promises nothing more than neoliberal oppression. The question then, that Chan poses, shifts from understanding acceptable inequality into determining what constitutes violence. If the status quo is quietly violent, is that more, less or equal to the physical conflict between protestors and authorities?

Though I can’t recall which of the figures in the film said it, the words loll about in my head as I pull myself up and out of my seat by my western, capitalist bootstraps, “It’s painful being a non-violent militant.” Chan said he asks himself, “Is it just armchair activism?” But I can’t help thinking it must be more, for its brave aesthetic – sometimes ugly, garish and unpolished – “real”, I think. “Justice has no homeland, remember that,” he muses, “You are just looking at a situation.” Looking, I wonder, “Am I just an audience to activism?”

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Festival website: <https://iffr.com/en> [HTTPS://IFFR.COM/EN]

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Tara Judah is Cinema Producer at Bristol's Watershed, and has worked on the programming and editorial for the cinema's archive, classic and repertory film festival, Cinema Rediscovered since its inception in 2016. Prior to her post at Watershed, Tara was Co-Director at 20th Century Flicks video shop, programmed films at Cube Microplex in Bristol, for Australia's iconic single screen repertory theatre, The Astor, and for Melbourne's annual feminist film event, Girls on Film Festival. She has written for *Senses of Cinema*, *Desist Film*, *Monocle* and *Sight & Sound* and has dissected cinema over the airwaves in Britain and Australia for Monocle24, BBC World Service, Triple R, ABC RN and JOY FM.

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