PHANTASMS OF DISSENT: HONG KONG'S NEW DOCUMENTARY VERNACULAR

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Blurred faces and a largely undifferentiated mass of people make up the protagonists of the films *Taking Back the Legislature* (Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers, 2020) and *Inside the Red Brick Wall* (Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers, 2020). Depicting two critical events in Hong Kong's protests of 2019, the documentaries were shot in a time of relentless mass demonstrations, released in a stifling climate of crackdowns on civil society, and seen amid newly instated film-censorship laws promulgated under a broad rubric of national-security legislation. Produced collectively and credited anonymously out of concern for the filmmakers' safety, *Taking Back the Legislature* and *Inside the Red Brick Wall* illuminate the messy scrum of direct actions—their tensions, desperation, and stakes—in unflinching detail.

Yet with all their vivid, often unsettling, depictions of violent arrests of protesters, their vividness stops short of incriminating their subjects or making them identifiable. "Everyone has become porous. The light and the message go right through us," Marshall McLuhan observed aloud in 1977 at an appearance on the Canadian public-broadcasting show *The Education of Mike McManus*. Seated in tight focus, with the camera facing the host, McLuhan reflected further: "When you're on the telephone or on radio or on T.V., you don't have the physical body—you're just an image on the air."[1]

This disposition of the body on camera, delicate and wavering in the air, as McLuhan describes it, while himself "on air" in one of his last appearances on television before he died in 1980, presents a vision of the subject in disintegration under the pressure of state omniscience. "When you don't have a physical body, you're a discarnate being," McLuhan warns. "You have a very different relation to the world around you. I think this has been one of the big effects of the electric age. It has deprived people, really, of their identity."[2]

Some forty-five years after McLuhan's words on the porousness of the subject on-screen, the age of surveillance has become more pervasive and new media, in instantaneous and networked circulation, have come to accelerate this deprivation of a person's being on film. Image capture, in the age of surveillance, is a process of dispossession.

Taking Back the Legislature follows the pivotal siege of the Hong Kong Legislative Council on July 1, 2019, which marked a shift in the ethos of the protests from civil disobedience to a more confrontational approach. *Inside the Red Brick Wall*, in turn, chronicles the twelve-day occupation at Hong Kong Polytechnic University. A period of four months separates the events recorded in the two films, and the police seem to have behaved differently on camera in the two works. For those not participating in them directly, the protests were often witnessed through fleeting clips circulated on social media, masked figures racing through clouds of tear gas or laser pointers shooting across a cityscape above the fires of barricades. Whereas the demonstrations beginning in June 2019 against an extradition bill proposed earlier that year had been characterized by tactics like the Bruce Lee–inspired "be water," with crowds fluidly assembling and dispersing to avoid being kettled, here the viewer encounters new strategies: a fierce and enduring occupation of a university or a siege of the halls of state power, exponentially raising personal and political stakes on the front lines.

These two recent works by the Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers group illuminate the frontiers of documentary filmmaking and its ethics today, drawing a vivid narrative path between censorship and surveillance, even as they stand apart from prior conventions of advocacy documentary or news journalism. The filmmakers' choice to hold the frame tightly on a single event for each film differs markedly from other films about the protests, such as *Blue Island* (Chan Tze-woon, 2022), *Revolution of*

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Our Times (Kiwi Chow, 2021), and *Do Not Split* (Anders Hammer, 2020), which attempt to tell the story of the whole movement or assemble the connections between many parts of Hong Kong history. In the films by Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers, the camera is constantly on the move, always trying to catch up to events as they unfold on the ground. The moving camera moves like a body and shakes and bumps and collides with other bodies.

These works by the Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers group must be read within a globally dispersed conversation about screen culture as related to surveillance cinema, in terms of the ways in which these films challenge the canon of Hong Kong cinema, and must also be read materially within the juridical context in which they are made: in a time of crackdown on civil society and growing film-censorship laws.

The films' protagonists constitute a phantasm of a spirit of dissent, challenging conventions of a singular identifiable protagonist. A style of filmmaking undergirded by the legal changes that deem any depictions of the 2019 protests to be seditious and in violation of the National Security Law of 2020, Hong Kong's emerging new cinema must be read within the context of that law, since these films become entangled with the passing of new film-censorship regulations that impede their ability to be seen in Hong Kong in addition to complicating their release globally.

The Films Themselves

Taking Back the Legislature opens at 6 a.m. on the twenty-second anniversary of the handover of Hong Kong.[3] In contrast to the rest of the film, it is an eerily calm (and foreboding) beginning. Protesters pay respects with a series of bows at a memorial for martyrs of the 2019 protest movement, pasted on a concrete wall. Nearby, black balloons, paper cranes, and flowers are ritually laid. A rain forecast forces the ceremony of the anniversary to move inside the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre, where Chief Executive Carrie Lam and other Hong Kong government officials are shown on-screen, intercut with televised footage of crowds singing the Chinese national anthem. A wide shot shows two helicopters flying overhead, one bearing a Chinese flag and the other a Hong Kong flag, the latter helicopter flying lower and behind the first. The weather begins to clear, and raised middle fingers emerge from the crowd of protesters, brandished at the helicopters.

What follows is a series of fierce negotiations on the protest's front lines, seemingly on the verge of boiling

Thousands of protestors in yellow construction helmets assembled outside of the legislative council in *Taking Back the Legislature.*

over and torpedoing the momentum generated by any previous actions. An anonymized mass of people clamors to orchestrate a series of critical decisions on the streets, winning collective consensus at every turn. As the day goes on, front-liners advance closer to the doors of the legislative council complex. Umbrellas move in formation toward the wall of police. Along the way, negotiations on the right time and tactics for storming the complex begin to erupt. After taking a vote, the crowd mobilizes to set a "defense line," assembling makeshift materials for barricades and personal protective gear, such as umbrellas, as a shield from tear gas and pepper spray. They begin assembling water bottles (to be used to douse and defuse tear-gas canisters) as first-aiders, wearing helmets and yellow vests, and strapped with supplies including saline, begin to prepare for the upcoming conflict.

In the course of this great odyssey, various figures emerge from the crowd, arguing with the front-liners and attempting to impede them from entering the legislative council. A young woman, pleading that there is no turning back, implores them to stop. The crowd retorts, asking her to tell that to the police. Later, an elderly woman tells the front-liners the glass is unbreakable and that what they are trying to accomplish is a dead end. She is laughed off, as the majority of protesters thank her and clap. Voices from the crowd, wary of potential agitators trying to diffuse the energy, remark on how there are "ghosts"—Cantonese slang for spies—among them.

When the front-liners finally near the glass doors, they meet face-to-face with prodemocratic legislative council members who argue that their actions must be led by reason—the last line in attempting to dissuade them from occupying the lawmaking body. The legislator Lam Cheuk-ting argues, "I just don't want you to get hurt and arrested." The protesters retort by asking him to open the doors for the front-liners in order to prevent this. One jeers sarcastically, "How much do you love your seat? Just say it. Say it today: 'I still want to be a legislator. I love my position.'" Lam Cheuk-ting pleads, "All of us in the movement need to talk together." Another says flatly, "If you were capable of doing your job, we should have succeeded. We wouldn't even be here." As the protesters near the glass doors of the legislative council, still more attempts are made by other lawmakers. Claudia Mo asks, "Ten years' imprisonment for participation in a riot. Is it worth it?" A protester responds, "Worthwhile or not is not the question here. Your pan-democratic friends betrayed us all."

The filmmakers resist using any narration to streamline the film's time line of events; these arguments, presented in their bare form, show the heart of grievance, their fierce entanglements, and the disagreements within the movement. By including varying perspectives, from those of journalists to those of state news outlets, the filmmakers were able to produce a singularly penetrating view into the heart of the front lines of protesters—their internal political debates with prodemocratic lawmakers, their debates with other protesters who favored civil disobedience, and even their debates with the police.

Illustrating a story of entrapment, suspicion, fear, guilt, flight, and exhaustion, *Inside The Red Brick Wall* describes a slow process of attrition in a siege inside a university. Mirroring the first film, the event entailed protest strategies defying the "be water" ethos of the earlier Hong Kong protests that shifted locations and avoided kettling. In the occupation of Polytechnic University, protesters, many of them appearing to be of high school or university age, attempted to cut off a city's main artery of traffic and hold the economy hostage by laying siege to the university grounds, which are situated at the mouth of the Cross-Harbor Tunnel in Kowloon leading to Hong Kong Island. But by using the tactic of a siege, the protesters became trapped within the walls of the university.

Again, instead of focusing on any one individual, the film features a mass protagonist, one with shared aspirations and internal contradictions. One watches blurred faces, sometimes engaged in fierce disagreement, discuss how to deal with the menacing presence of the police. Unable to leave without facing arrest as police waited and surrounded the university, the protesters found themselves in the asphyxiating embrace of a police kettle lasting over twelve days and resulting in thirteen hundred people being arrested, including first-aiders and human rights monitors.[4]

In one scene, a policeman on a loudspeaker launches into a monologue as if it were a speech within a police academy taken from the script of *Infernal Affairs* (2002), soundtracked by music played to further taunt the protesters. The camera tightens in to a focus on the police below, who cannot see the protesters barricading themselves. The protesters have blocked themselves from view in high ground above, occupying a footbridge. The loudspeaker broadcasts his voice to the protesters: "You are really rubbish. You talk without action. You cannot do a thing. You have no perseverance. I despise you all. Not because you have no principles, no bottom line, no commitment or sense of responsibility. It's because you have no brain." Another cop echoes, "Well said."

Open umbrellas assembled to prevent spotlights from exposing protestors occupying Hong Kong Polytechnic University in *Inside the Red Brick Wall*.

Genre Roots, Reframed

Inside the Red Brick Wall and *Taking Back the Legislature* provide a fundamental challenge to the legacy of Hong Kong cinema, including the genres of gangster films and action flicks that feature criminals from the Hong Kong triad as much as they do the Hong Kong police. Hong Kong established its reputation as a global cinema capital through a prodigious output of kung fu pictures and "bullet ballets" that came to define genre filmmaking in sinophone cinema and beyond. The city's cinematic contributions, especially from the 1980s to the early 2000s, consisted of crime thrillers, especially films about police, with titles such as *Police Story* (Jackie Chan, 1985), *Infernal Affairs* (Andrew Lau and Alan Mak, 2002), *Hard Boiled* (John Woo, 1992), and *PTU* (Johnnie To, 2003), all by directors who became recognized auteurs. This rich repertoire of films was influenced by Hollywood films of the time, but also proved to be inversely influential, inspiring titles such as Martin Scorsese's *The Departed* (2006).

A trope of these "copaganda" films—"shoot 'em up" flicks, gangster movies, and crime thrillers featuring police as central protagonists—is often a failure of justice or an unwanted or wrong outcome that requires the intervention of a cop. As the protagonist, he uses any means necessary, wielding excessive force or going against protocol, to deliver justice. The irony of these productions is that many of them were funded by the underworld of Hong Kong, rumored to have been embezzling money through film production.

These films have historically promoted an image of Hong Kong police as "Asia's finest," a force that touts itself as one of the oldest, founded in British colonial Hong Kong.[5] These optics of the local police force have by now been grafted onto cinematic history. It is this legacy of the cop on film that is being challenged today across new media and in a surge of documentary films.

With cops now being documented in real time through both news outlets and citizen journalists in multichannel live streams of protests, residents across the city have been afforded new points of view, witnessing the front lines against police. The ubiquity of live streams—distributing photos and videos of police using projectiles, tear gas, batons, and violent arrests—became politically galvanizing. Broadcast by both professional and citizen journalists, these emerging media forms became a new hearth by the light of which Hong Kong people's perceptions changed toward the unfavorable with regard to both police and the state. Incidents such as 8.31 (the 2019 Prince Edward Station attack, in which police shut down the train station

and indiscriminately attacked people) were widely circulated online and became one of many pivotal moments in the Hong Kong protest time line.

Less known globally is the nature of the Hong Kong film and entertainment industry, which had—and continues to have—strong ties to triads, or local crime syndicates. It is these same crime syndicates that were accomplices with Hong Kong police in such events as the Yuen Long attacks, where police and triads have been documented shaking hands at the entrance of a subway station that became the site of a mob attack on civilians who were alighting from the train.[6] The legacy of Hong Kong's canonical crime thrillers and films about police has been complicated by these actions by police operating in plain sight and with impunity, now embodying the rule of law as enforcers, regulators, and arbiters of corporal punishment.

As film historian Cameron L. White argues, the "traditional cinema—commercial, independent, or otherwise—played a minor role in the 2019 protests. Digital media was far more instrumental in connecting and mobilizing younger generations, while also offering a vibrant playground for Hongkongers disenchanted with longer-standing modes of image production."[7] Real-time videos of police circulated through social media, serving as critical material to energize protests. Cops were seen embodying the "state of exception"—that is, a sovereign ability to transcend the rule of law or dictate it via police conduct carried out in the name of maintaining public order. These images were highly politicizing, testimony to the decisive transformation of Hong Kong screen culture from one with a legacy of fictional films to one with a legacy of political documentary.

In a Time of Revolt, a Revolt against Time

Resisting documentary conventions of advocacy documentary and journalistic conventions of reducing any collective voice to individual ones, the Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers group have created a new view of protest and social change. A surfeit of fierce divisions and negotiations within the movement overflows onto the streets. This style of documentary filmmaking—carefully assembling messy, dispersed materials from multiple filmmakers so that they form one narrative—engages the viewer in the liveliness of these events, unfiltered, in advance of any narrativization of events by historians, news anchors, or even elite activists.

"The standard account promoted by revolutionary elites," political scientist James C. Scott argues, "is buttressed

A group of protestors entering the chamber of the legislative council, flanked by walls covered in protest phrases and epithets, in *Taking Back the Legislature*.

by the way in which the historical process itself 'naturalizes the world,' erasing evidence of its contingency…. In the same way, none of the historical participants in, say, World War I or the Battle of the Bulge, not to mention the Reformation or the Renaissance, knew at the time that they were participating in anything that could be so summarily described."[8] In the aftermath of 2019, the protests have often been described in shorthand as a prodemocracy movement. While the aim of the protests was indeed for universal suffrage, the difference between struggles in the street and confrontations with police as depicted in *Taking Back the Legislature* and *Inside the Red Brick Wall* tells a nuanced tale of political strategies and their efficacy. Such critical disagreements captured on the front line illuminate the critical oral history—what Scott calls the "evidence" of a historical event's "contingency."[9] With the filmmakers uncertain even of the outcome of the day, every minute captured seems to portend a critical turning point, an unknowable outcome just around the bend.

These works capture a highly elusive sense of time in the midst of revolt. It is, as political theorist Achille Mbembe writes, "necessary to think about the status of that peculiar time that is *emerging time*." Mbembe continues:

> To think relevantly about this time that is appearing, this passing time, meant abandoning conventional views, for these only perceive time as a current that carries individuals and societies from a background to a foreground, with the future emerging necessarily from the past and following the past, itself irreversible. But of central interest was that peculiar time that might be called the time of existence and experience, the time of entanglement.[10]

Devoid of any soundtrack to prompt tone and with no consistent narration to summarize or contextualize events, both *Taking Back the Legislature* and *Inside the Red Brick Wall* immerse the viewer in the burning fury of rage, doubt, and fear that the protests evoked. These events, edited in relentless succession one after another, grant no respite to the viewer, offer no easy resolution, no hope in the outcome. This emotional palette of a pivotal time of revolt in Hong Kong tells of a time of painful and prolonged entanglement with state violence.

In a key scene in *Taking Back the Legislature*, the protest proceeds with a full awareness of the stakes involved, both politically for Hong Kong and personally for participants in terms of possible imprisonment for rioting. The protesters face the task ahead of them: to occupy the halls of state and legislative power. As their conversation begins to trail off and stagnate, the crowd of protesters yields to clear space for an empty circle, bodies moving as if making space for a mosh pit, and a makeshift barricade emerges. Constructed and joined together by zip ties, an arrowhead-shaped barricade is constructed from conjoined metal street barriers. Umbrellas hang across the side, meant to be easily accessible for protesters in the inevitable event of police pepper spray. Cameras are ubiquitous: there is a pit of journalists who at first outnumber the front-liners leading the charge. A repurposed metal garbage collector weighted down with a pile of flattened cardboard emerges. Umbrellas open around the front-liners who move into a defense line.

Lawmakers outside the doors make final attempts to stop them, pleading with the protesters, "You cannot save Hong Kong this way. You'll drag others in. You will only hurt more people." In the distance, chants from the crowd drown them out: "Add oil, Hong Kongers!" The action now is inevitable. The first crash inspires the cops, sheepish-looking, with their own video cameras, to run up to the glass. Some are gesturing toward the protesters, yelling but inaudible outside. One looks uncertain, pulls up to the window, slowly clutching a shield, eyes darting. The lawmakers attempt to reason with the police through the glass. A woman whose face is blurred writes a message to the police and holds it against the pane, a drawn heart, asking the police not to rush the protesters, a hand-drawn plea for mercy. A group begins to take metal poles in an attempt to break the glass, making thuds against the shatterproof facade. The shatterproof glass is stubborn and eventually forms spiderweb-like fractures against its surface, which the police—blank faced, some looking more uneasy than others—peer through.

Unlike the fictional films of Hong Kong's past that featured chase scenes between cops and criminals crashing through glass, the shatterproof glass that protects the halls of the legislative council from intrusion does not shatter easily. An intertitle appears: it takes the protesters four hours to break through. When the glass finally gives way, it dislodges from the frame of the doorway in one intact piece and protesters push over the threshold.

Building upon the legacy of imported action films of previous decades, a film such as *Taking Back the Legislature* marks a new era of documentary filmmaking—one that, from the middle of an uprising, reshapes the legacy of "crime thrillers" on-screen in Hong Kong. Showing each tactical action as if part of an instructional manual to circulate globally for protesters in any other city, it also draws connections for a new global movement whereby "action" takes insurgent form.

Police peering through the shattered glass in *Taking Back the Legislature*.

From Movement to Siege

A siege is literally defined by dictionaries as a "military blockade of a city or fortified place to compel it to surrender."[11] *Taking Back the Legislature* and *Inside the Red Brick Wall* are both films that record the symbolic usurpation of institutional architecture—from the halls of state power (the heart of lawmaking in a semiautonomous one-country two-systems political framework) to the university campus that fed talent to the major industries of Hong Kong: business, construction, engineering, hotel and tourism management, and others.

This glass that the protesters break in the climax to *Taking Back the Legislature* is the membrane through which the protests pass to a point of no return, leading to a tonal shift that both foreshadows and informs the next film, *Inside the Red Brick Wall*. The events of the Hong Kong protest time line trace exactly the moment of this radical shift between passive tactics of civil disobedience and demonstration on one hand and a more confrontational approach to penetrate and occupy the halls of state power on the other. Once inside the legislative council, the protesters attempt to occupy the space for as long as possible.[12]

In one scene shot inside, black spray paint is used to cover the Hong Kong bauhinia emblem, as if redacting the symbol above the center of the legislative council floor. One blurred face speaks: "We urge more Hong Kongers to come forward. To reclaim our council. Hong Kongers need to reclaim the council." After more speeches, one protester removes his face mask to address a pit of journalists: "If you have the ability to, occupy this place! If you don't, you could besiege the legislative council and peacefully use your bodies to protect us. We cannot afford to lose any more." Aware that the journalists around him are broadcasting live, and speaking into the multiple cameras to command bodies to join in resistance, he continues, "We care about our homeland. We risk our bodies to guard our homeland." The biopower of resistance is displayed in the film, from the arc of the narrative of bodies negotiating to enter the halls of state power to the gestures made inside. The protesters outside on the streets, he beckons, should hold the legislative halls from the outside in a protective embrace.

Months later, although not captured in this film, prodemocratic lawmakers would be physically dragged out of the same halls. Described lightly at the time by foreign newspapers as a "brawl" between pro-Beijing and opposition lawmakers,[13] the event to eliminate all prodemocratic or oppositional lawmakers from the legislative floor on May 18, 2020, would foreshadow the National Security Law of June 30, 2020, followed by the mass arrest of fifty-three elected prodemocracy officials and activists on January 5, 2021.[14]

By late 2021, all prodemocratic lawmakers had been jailed, charged with violating the National Security Law of 2020, with a potential life sentence in prison. Many still await sentencing in prison. Some had already fled and self-exiled from Hong Kong. *Taking Back the Legislature* ends with a police crackdown on the protests along the harbor front as protesters leave the legislative council space. The perspective of the camera veers from a cloud of tear gas to wide shots of police clearances of the street, indicative of the dispersed angles around the event by filmmakers operating as a collective. At the end, a single camera runs up into the empty halls of the legislative council, breathless, as if to catch a glimpse of it one last time. Moving from a direct-cinema style to a subtle imprint of verité, the camera operator can be heard breathing as the camera affords a view of a defamed legislative hall.

Taking Back the Legislature shows insurgent actions that lie outside the bounds of propriety by social actors whose actions in these spaces of state power are a challenge to sovereignty, who take part in a history of storming the architecture of state power as a critical event of revolution, challenging the very legitimacy of power. As Hong Kong cultural theorist Ackbar Abbas observed, prior to the handover of 1997:

> As a city, Hong Kong has been very much the plaything and ambiguous beneficiary of history. Colonized by the British in the nineteenth century, occupied by the Japanese in the Second World War; swelled by the influx of refugees from communist China after 1949, which gave it so many of its cooks and tailors and entrepreneurs; taken in hand by the multinationals as it developed into an international city; and now to be returned to China: Hong Kong's history is one of shock and radical changes.[15]

The protesters' ritualistic gestures enter a political history of protest as animating grievance through bodily occupation of symbols of state power, making connections to various occupations and acts of civil disobedience that usurp space for resistant ends; the single protester who unmasked himself inside the legislative chamber even makes reference in his speech to the Sunflower Student Movement in Taiwan in 2014. *Taking Back the Legislature* captures what Abbas considers to be how "history exists if not in monuments or written records, then in the jostling anachronisms and spatial juxtapositions seen on every street; that is, history is inscribed in spatial relations," he writes.[16] Here in the work of Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers, history is on display in spaces of symbolic political power, grafted onto the moving image and put into circulation amid networked relations of global multivectored insurrection.

A group of journalists photograph police emerging out of a cloud of teargas from *Taking Back the Legislature*.

Beyond Opacity: Documentation as Capture

The exposure of an individual's face is a critical element, offered in contrast to the mass of faces that have been blurred or obscured. The unmasked protester is aware he is exposing himself to show the extent of the stakes of the movement; in fact, for exposing himself in this siege, he would later self-exile.[17] Being captured on film adds an additional layer to the relationship between contingency and the moving image. As Mary Ann Doane argues about an earlier time and artifact:

> What was registered on film was life itself in all its multiplicity, diversity, and contingency. This archival desire is intimately linked to the technological assurance of indexicality. The fidelity of the image to its referent was no longer dependent upon the skill or honesty of a particular artist. The imprint of the real was automatically guaranteed by the known capability of the machine. For the first time, an aesthetic representation—previously chained to the idea of human control—could be made by accident. This strengthened the medium's alliance with contingency.[18]

This quality of contingency is also present in the ways images live on and even in how one might anticipate that images will live on. The archival impulse also spells out the cost of being recorded. To be captured on film in such insurgent actions is to experience a violent action; yet at the same time, participants rely on the media and cameras to record these bodies and the historical significance of their actions in the halls of state power to make these acts count. They even consciously use live broadcasts around them to try to galvanize their comrades into action. Taking occupation of such a space registers public meaning as a symbolic act when such an act is widely visible. Those participating are consciously being registered as demonstrating discontent and are aware their images will interrupt the news cycle.

Exposed on this stage, with dozens of cameras capturing their actions and likenesses, protesters behave on camera with an acute and strategic awareness of their relation to cameras. Negotiating around the dozens of cameras surrounding them, masked protesters behave as an anonymized mass, aware of the weight of their actions as a symbolic takeover of political space. Still, they know that they are being incriminated in these same actions that are politically powerful and symbolic, know that they are being caught on camera committing acts that can land them in jail for up to ten years, or worse, through a system of increasingly opaque courts, can cause them to be disappeared by the state. Thus "capture" is a revelation as well as material evidence. The relationship between cinema and surveillance becomes especially vivid—or, as film historian Catherine Zimmer, states: when "practices of surveillance become representational and representational practices become surveillant … ultimately the distinctions between the two begin to fade away."[19] The status shifts, and the moving-image apparatus, to borrow the title of a book by James C. Scott, sees like the state.[20]

Filmmaking today, especially that which is made at the front lines of revolt against state power, elaborates on the contingency of cinema such that the afterlives of images, circulated broadly or leaked, make their capture potentially incriminating. The images they convey serve as evidence, as incriminating snares, as open wounds and spilled secrets.

Highly mediated captures of insurgent action are iterative, building upon a recent ten-year span of global uprisings in which "real time" and the moving image took new, violent meaning. Writing on the Arab uprisings, Donatella Della Ratta argues:

> With the Arab uprisings, particularly with Syria, the enmeshment between violence and visibility reached its peak: the 2011 street movements carry an unprecedented networked dimension that inscribes both the act of a peaceful protester filming with a smartphone and that of an armed man raising his gun to shoot at them—both the cam shot and the gun shot—into a dynamic participatory culture. Immediately, the violence performed on the ground is rendered into a digital commodity available to be copied, shared, manipulated, and liked—all within the economy of the social web. This aspect never emerged before, even in highly mediatized yet pre-networked conflicts, like Iraq in 2003.[21]

A sad face spray-painted on a streetlight in *Inside the Red Brick Wall*.

Residing not only in "real time" but through the mediated time lines of Twitter and the web's twenty-four-hour news cycle ruled by the rapid circulation of media, such documentation offers material evidence, or visible proof, of criminality. Yet the work of the Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers group, themselves anonymous for their own security, attests to a different model of filmmaking that transcends surveillance cinema in practice and proposes a filmmaking that itself joins the subjects portrayed in anonymity and fugitivity. Theirs is a filmmaking that specializes in unlearning "the optics of the State that we have internalized," as Peter Snowdon describes such fugitive approaches to filmmaking, which join the subject in telling the story of the self through its subject. As Snowdon argues:

> But to film as the person who made this video does—with a willingness to sacrifice optical clarity for the sake of fidelity not to one body (her own), but to the plural body of the collective and its multiple and potentially contradictory affects—is to accept that part of opacity that is always present, both within us and without us, and which cannot be eliminated. For it is that opacity of both the individual and the collective body which makes another kind of politics possible.[22]

When the protesters realize the police are not coming to arrest them once inside, they fear they have been ensnared in a trap and begin negotiating a time to leave. As the arguments intensify, an incredible gesture in the film begins to emerge. The protesters' shoes are blurred, and then most of the screen, for a few moments, is redacted: obscured bodies and faces cover the frame. Escalating into heated disagreement over when to leave the legislative council and realizing that they must all do it together, protesters begin dragging one another out of the legislative council, pushing onward so the movement can keep going after this day. They scream that they must all leave together and not leave any person behind. The composition of the frame for a few moments appears almost impressionistic, as the hazy figures tussle and erupt in disagreement. These figures—opaque, obstinate, and abstracted by blur—avoid the camera's capture for several moments as the entire frame is occupied by blurred bodies and faces.

The expansion of national-security issues in Hong Kong extends the criminalization of a broad range of acts under four categories: subversion, succession, terrorism, and collusion with foreign forces. Moreover, the National Security Law passed in 2020 may be applied retroactively and even applied to offenses committed outside the jurisdiction of Hong Kong or any Chinese territory. Singling out the documentary as genre, Hong Kong film-censorship guidelines state: "The fact that a film purports to be a documentary or purports to report on or re-enact real events with immediate connection to circumstances in Hong Kong necessitates an even more careful consideration of its contents by the censor."[23] The language of the National Security Law suggests that any materials that depict or mention the protests could potentially be deemed a threat to sovereignty and therefore vulnerable to deletion, erasure, and censor.

"Blurring of the image, that is, to bewilderment rather than to understanding," as Ackbar Abbas has stated, means that "[t]he closer you look, the less there is to see."[24] In many frames of this film, it is "as if every shot has to be closely attended to, because things are always surreptitiously passing you by. This is the *déjà disparu*, a reality that is always outpacing our awareness of it, a reality that the film continually catches up with."[25] Abbas was actually writing about Wong Kar-wai's debut film, *As Tears Go By* (1988), but his description of its techniques of blurred image, rapid camera movement, and Hong Kong's unstable historical and temporal space resonates eerily here.

Rather than push an audience into dissociating and disconnecting from this mass of protagonists, the effect of the anonymized images in *Inside the Red Brick Wall* and *Taking Back the Legislature* is to allow these figures to take on a spectral presence, their bodies and spirit constituting the dimensions of a protagonist. The viewer hears the roar of their differences and the emboldened spirit of their solidarity. They appear phantasmagoric as their distorted faces make a menacing point about the vulnerability of the subjects. The viewer cannot see them, because it is unsafe to do so.

On the power of redaction, Travis Linnemann and Corina Medley state, "As a recognition of and resignation to the (un)known, these redacted black spaces therefore reveal a distinct mode of political subjectivity. It is here, amidst the everyday terror of police and prisons, that some political subjects admit, 'I see that there is nothing to see.'" What the viewer sees has not been erased, "but occluded by a purposefully created void."[26] They can be distinguished only by their limbs, the variations between their masks and helmet styles, and small differences in the black clothes they wear. Without context for the protesters—their jobs, schools, neighborhoods, or even ages—the mass as protagonist is an undifferentiated collective. The audience can only guess at their ages based on the framing of their bodies, their voices, possibly even their gestures. The unknown political consequences of their actions, such as years-long or even life sentences, for participation in demonstrations, and

even the fear of disappearance, only intensify in *Taking Back the Legislature*, made at a time when the protests were escalating unceasingly. The stakes become higher and actions more desperate.

In *Inside the Red Brick Wall*, as the days go on, there are fewer and fewer journalists seen on campus documenting the siege—a troubling sign, since their phone and television screens represent the only tether to the world outside the university walls. These feeds offer protesters glimpses into protests around the city, including attempted rescues where other groups of protesters are trying to get as close to the university as possible to save them. Yet it is also through these digital feeds that protesters' worst fears are stoked, while they are trapped: a video, circulating online, is seen playing on a phone in a protester's hands, depicting a police officer overheard threatening a repeat of Tiananmen Square at Polytechnic University. In the only interview in either film where a subject speaks to the camera, a man whose face is covered in a ski mask and blurred says, "Seems we are completely surrounded. And there aren't a lot of journalists here. In here if I die no one will know. Although I'm prepared to die, I don't want to die with no one knowing. If I get arrested outside or thrown off a building at least my body can be found. By being arrested when no journalists are present, I could disappear without a corpse. I actually am very scared at heart."

As Avery Gordon states, "The disappeared have lost all social and political identity: no bureaucratic records, no funerals, no memorials, no bodies, nobody."[27] It is their ghostly presence that haunts the screen in *Inside The Red Brick Wall*—resulting in a shift in tone owing to feelings of desperation and the rapid attrition of a prolonged siege. As much as cinema becomes "proof" and "evidence," it also serves here to illuminate an event in the Hong Kong protests, one in which many from the outside didn't have visibility into the extent or events happening inside the university walls in which the protesters were trapped as the number of journalists dwindled even as the occupation endured. Rescues were attempted, including some involving motorbikes taking away protesters who rappelled from a highway overpass down a few stories to another road. The protester who gave the short interview carried a bow and arrow, and his face was masked and his eyes blurred out. The act of being recorded becomes a way for him, albeit anonymized, to not disappear totally without a trace.

Although the fates of the lawmakers and elite movement activists are known, those of the faceless collective that made up the Hong Kong protesters, or of the front-liners in both films, remain unknown. There have been glimpses of sentencings through the news, but as the courts processed the large volume of arrests from the protests, the fervor of

A single shoe and abandoned umbrellas haunt the screen in *Inside the Red Brick Wall*.

news media and the appetite for spectacle have dissipated, accelerated by the political pressure on journalists.

There is a single, uninterrupted five-minute take in the middle of *Taking Back the Legislature* that depicts protesters attempting to scramble through an escape route on a highway overpass, in which no faces are obscured. Intercepted by cops, protesters are picked out of a stream as if the police are hunting. Between the shelling of tear-gas rounds and other projectiles, groups of police capture protesters and pin them to the ground. The camera swings to film one person who has been pinned to the ground, with one shoe on and the other foot bare. Another person is being yanked around by the police while trying to wring free. You can hear journalists from around him, capturing the arrest, ask for his ID and name—a way to try to keep people from being disappeared by the state. The restless camera drifting from face to face shows all these people's faces without blurring. The film deliberately implicates the viewer as witness to these peoples' existence. Subtle gestures speak to a sensitivity around faces and how the camera engages with whether people want to be seen or not seen. Another woman, aware of the camera in front of her, attempts to say her ID number and name, while several cops converge on top of her, including one kneeling on her back. The camera gets closer as her gas mask is ripped off. She manages to say her whole Chinese name and ID number, even as a cop shoves her face into the ground.

From historical revision and denialism to criminal liability and potential infringement on national security, censorship in the name of national security initiates an epistemic crisis. It is imperative to read these films in the political and legal context within which they have been made but equally to study them through a lens focused on the obstacles inherent in the censorship, screening, and circulation restrictions in place in Hong Kong and beyond.

Such a study can illuminate the ways in which the formal gestures seen throughout the works of the Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers function to identify the void that is present in what the viewer can see. In acts of resistance, a film grammar is emerging in favor of obtuse expressions—toward the blurring of an image, the status of front-line negotiations as critical oral histories, and the choreographing of disparate materials into a collective work. Through Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers' elegant organization of chaotic material, one is better able to see, in all its fullness and complexity, the action on the ground.

The communal and diffused gaze of collective filmmaking mounts a powerful alternative to the long-held authority of the voice of a single author. Gestures of blurred faces are selective throughout the film—not to be read as a sign that the filmmakers simply failed to obtain release forms but rather as proof that they are actively protecting the individuals as subjects whom they depict on film. Their excessive uses of blurring, even upon a protester's shoes, and a favoring of oblique and opaque perspectives by which to show the actions on the front lines are modes of critically resisting the danger of visual media as material that potentially acts as witness to violations of the law or as evidence that incriminates or makes subjects on-screen liable.

Such formal tactics may be read as animating Édouard Glissant's sense of the right to opacity but should be located more specifically as gestures claiming a right to blur, a right to control leaks, and a right to stop the light from penetrating through the subject. A blurred and collectively constructed protagonist defies narrative expectation for a singular exposed protagonist who petitions the viewer for empathy. Amid varying perspectives, from journalists to state news outlets, the filmmakers were able to accomplish a singularly penetrating view—from the heart of the front lines between protesters and police—that resists documentary conventions of advocacy journalism while avoiding foreclosure by moralization.

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Notes

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8. James C. Scott, *Seeing like the State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 93.
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