

LA WEEKLY

FREE

WEST LOOKS EAST: CITY ON FIRE and RESERVOIR DOGS

Knocking Quentin Tarantino has been a local sport for some time, but now it's gone national. Just last week I read in the trades that some East Coast film student with a hard-on for the *auteur du jour* has made a 12-minute compilation movie which proves, once and for all, how Tarantino rode to fame on his sensational 1992 feature debut, *Reservoir Dogs*, by ripping off Hong Kong director Ringo Lam's 1987 *City on Fire*. Accusations about Lam's film were in circulation long before *Pulp Fiction* and Tarantino became this town's great indie hope, but they've taken on almost mythic proportions since. The charges escalated just around the time of *Natural Born Killers*, stoked by its upstart producers, who got famous and maybe even rich off Tarantino's script, and then proceeded to damn him at every turn. (*NBK* producer Don Murphy has insisted that *Res Dogs* "plays like a scene-by-scene plagiarism" of the Lam movie.) The film geeks have had their fun too, since nothing provokes the embittered as much as one who steps outside the tribe. (Remember *Freaks*? "One of us, one of us . . .") The stunning success of *Pulp Fiction* has only made things worse, of course, as have the fistful of Oscar nominations.



Reservoir Dogs

Which is why it's a good thing that anyone who's ever entertained a sour or anxious thought about Tarantino can go see *City on Fire* on the big screen and draw conclusions for themselves. Not only do the subtitles make for a better read in wide screen, so does the film's star and Hong Kong's answer to Robert Mitchum, Chow Yun Fat — who just may be the coolest man alive. And, oh yeah, the Lam movie is really nifty, and the occasional similarities between it and the superior *Reservoir Dogs* are noticeable but not striking. (*Nuart*; Fri.-Sun., March 17-19)(Manohla Dargis)