

John Woo: Opus of the Orient

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Anyone who enjoys action-adventure movies may have come across the North American directorial debut of John Woo in the Jean Claude Van Damme movie "Hard Target".

Although it received a lot of fanfare, I felt that audiences were not sure about how to react to his personal style. When I went, some people laughed at certain scenes when it was not warranted, and it had nothing to do with the action on the screen. Despite this, Woo is a giant in the Hong Kong movie industry, as he has made many movies in his native land.

Woo has a style all his own, and he follows a certain formula throughout all his movies. Most obvious is the use of guns in action sequences. The characters like to shoot anyone and everyone, to the point of excess. I believe that Woo's motto is: why use one bullet when seven or eight will do. Some may feel that the violence is excessive, but it is his bread and butter. Gun fights fuel the action.

Woo's directing techniques are unique. He likes using slow-motion and stop-action photography to accentuate the moment. Slowing down the movements of a character in the midst of a fire fight turns it into a ballet of death. There is a poetic air about each motion, and a freeze frame leaves a distinct picture in the mind of the viewer. The choreogra-

phy is incredible, especially when the action is fast and furious. The use of camera angles and lighting adds to the flow of the movie, and the use of music adds an interesting flair.

Most of Woo's characters have a nobility about them, while also being tragic. After all, most of them die at some point in their movie. More often than not, one is left standing to ponder what has happened prior to all the carnage surrounding him. While the female characters are usually weak, and die, they tend to be important at the same time, as they usually bring characters together or fuel their quests. Supporting characters are eventually killed, which leads the central characters to seek revenge, and minor characters become cannon fodder.

There are many Woo movies from which one may choose, although not all video stores will carry them. "Killer" revolves around the impending collision between the assassin with a conscience and a heart of gold, and the cop who is too reckless to be trusted by his peers. They are drawn together by the woman accidentally blinded by the noble assassin, where they discover that they are kindred spirits. On the receiving end of both men are various gangsters looking to end the lives of both leading characters. Each protagonist has a sidekick who tries to keep them grounded, while fueling their rage with their deaths. There is abundant death in

this movie: I counted 30 people dead in the first 30 minutes.

"Hard Boiled" is about a cop whose goal it is to break up a gun-running syndicate. There are two ironies here: he is also too reckless to be on the force, and the actor is the assassin in the previous movie. He runs into an undercover cop who has infiltrated the mob, but the crazy cop does not find out until later. Again, there is a woman involved, but she is mere window dressing. The gun-runners turn out to have hidden in a hospital basement, which is the scene for the final confrontation. This one has lots of shooting and explosions.

"Bullet in the Head", despite its title, takes a while to get violent. It tells the tale of three youths who are lifelong friends, have hopes for the future, and end up getting

into trouble. Despite the promise of security in the marriage of one of the characters, they get involved in murder, forcing them to flee the country and seek their fortune elsewhere. In the middle of the impending violence that makes up this film, Woo throws in some political commentary. There are various scenes involving demonstrations against the British government that rules Hong Kong, and he tosses in pictures of brutality during war with a glimpse of the Vietnam conflict.

For action-adventure enthusiasts, I strongly recommend that you check out a John Woo film. If you can put up with the occasional romantic fluff and annoying subtitles, then you will be greatly rewarded by the superb action scenes. Gun battles have never been this exciting.

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