



Bullets and Brotherhood: The Films of John Woo

The Killer

The Killer Dip huet seung hung

Director: John Woo

Production Company: Film Workshop Co Ltd

Presented by: Golden Princess Film Productions, Magnum

Executive in Charge of Production:

Claudie Chung Chun

Producer: Tsui Hark

Unit Production Manager: Kwong-King Ngan

Production Manager: Patrick Yip, Virginia Lau

Assistant Production Managers: Deannie Yew, Roy Leung

Post-production Supervisor: Tsang Lai-ping

Production Accountant: Kathy Cheung

Production Assistant: Tse Chi Wah

1st Assistant Director: Patrick Leung Pak-kin

2nd Assistant Director: Leung Chi-ming

Script Supervisors: Janet Chin, WYsum Pao

Screenplay: John Woo

Directors of Photography: Wong Wing-hang,

Peter Pau Tak-Hei

Assistant Photographers: Yuen Chun-wah, Lee Wai-tak

Chief Electrician: Chik Kim-kit

Electrician: Kam Fook-shing

Chief Electrician: Lee Tak Shing

Stills Photography: Stephen Shin Gei-yin, Ip Wai-ming

Special Optical Effects: Cinefex Workshop

Editor: Fan Kung-ming

Assistant Editor: Pang Chin-kuen

Production Designer: Luk Man-wah

Assistant Art Director: Hsu Wei-kuo

Set Decorator: Tai Chun-ching

Properties: Yeung Sai-ching

Costumes: Shirley Chan Koo-fong

Wardrobe: Tong Ping

Make-up: Judy Mann, Yvonne Yen

Hairstylist: Benny Chow

Music: Lowell Lo

Title Song by: Lowell Lo, James Wong Jim, Tang Shushen

Title Song Performed by: Sally Yeh

Music Editor: David Wu Dai-wai

Sound Supervisor: Zeng Liping

Sound Effects: Ching Siu Lung

English Language Version: Sally Nichols, Lyps Inc

Subtitles: International Subtitle Co

Stunt Co-ordinators: Ching Siu-tung, Lau Chi-ho

Car Stunts: Magnum

Tea Lady: Sylvia Fung

Production Security: Gloria Ho

Laboratory: Mandarin Film Lab

Unit Publicist: Billie Chan

Cast:

Chow Yun-fat (Jeff, 'Mickey Mouse')

Danny Lee (Inspector 'Eagle' Lee, 'Dumbo')

Sally Yeh (Jennie)

Paul Chu Kong (Sydney Fung)

Kenneth Tsang Kong (Sergeant Randy Chung)

Lam Chung (Willie Tsang)

Shing Fui-on (Johnny Weng)

Yip Wing-cho (Tony Weng)

Ricky Yi (Frankie Feng)

Barry Wong (Chief Inspector Tu)

Parkman Wong Pak-man (Inspector Chan)

Ng Siu-hung (killer)

Yeung Sing, Ngan Siu-hung (bodyguards)

Tommy Wong (Wong Tong)

Hong Kong 1989 111 mins Digital (restoration)

A contemporary review

As an abstract of themes, images and motifs from classic American and French *film noir*, John Woo's film makes Walter Hill's *The Driver* look like Ken Loach. Woo began directing in 1973 and has soldiered his way through most Hong Kong genres, from kung-fu to Cantonese opera, but his career rocketed into overdrive when he joined Tsui Hark's Film Workshop in 1986 and made *A Better Tomorrow*, which became the highest-grossing film in Hong Kong history. Tsui prevailed on him to make *A Better Tomorrow II*, but he refused to make the third film in the series (actually a prequel to the other two, eventually directed by Tsui Hark himself) and turned to *The Killer* instead. Like all other Film Workshop productions (cf. *A Chinese Ghost Story*), Woo's recent films are steeped in the company's house style: hyper-kinetic pacing, high-gloss cinematography and regular injections of stunts and/or special effects. Unlike his colleagues, though, Woo has managed to resist 'creative interference' with his work; *A Better Tomorrow* and *The Killer* may owe their hyperbolic action scenes to company requirements, but they are probably the only Film Workshop movies to date not recast, reshot, recut or redirected by Tsui Hark.

The Killer is inescapably a self-conscious commentary on its own genre. Like a Leone Western, it foregrounds all its generic points of reference without apology or embarrassment. Woo told Hong Kong interviewers last year that he originally intended the film as a homage to Martin Scorsese and Jean-Pierre Melville: hence the name 'Jeff' (from *Le Samouraï*), the sensual, quasi-erotic treatment of male bonding, the emphasis on underworld codes of honour, the fragments of world-weary dialogue about feeling out of time and out of place, the conflation of Catholic and gangster elements (the decision to stage the climactic siege in a church, complete with candles, white doves and an exploding Madonna, is more 'Scorsese' than Scorsese himself) and much besides. In the United States – where it will probably be Hong Kong's first 'crossover' success since the heyday of Bruce Lee, if it survives the handicap of an 'X' rating – critics have tended to see *The Killer* in these terms exclusively, as a phenomenal reworking of Hollywood models: 'Magnificent Obsession remade by Sam Peckinpah,' in Jim Hoberman's memorable phrase.

What Woo's American fans have missed, doubtless because they failed to pick up on Hong Kong genre cinema last time around, are the film's equally deep roots in the Chinese *wuxia pian* ('martial chivalry' genre) of the 1960s. The film harks back with overwhelming nostalgia to the swordplay epics of Woo's adolescence. The Wang Yu character in Zhang Che's *Golden Swallow* (1968) is a virtual role model for Chow Yun-fat's Jeff: exquisitely tailored, stoic in adversity, disdainful of anaesthetic when treated for wounds, and given to slaughtering literally dozens of (deserving) foes whenever challenged. Wang Yu did not condescend to play men with friends, male or female, until well into the 1970s, but his director Zhang Che went on from *Golden Swallow* to specialise in intense male-bonding movies, always involving violent death – including *The Blood Brothers* (1973), on which John Woo worked as assistant director. It is hardly a coincidence that while Woo was busy updating these all-but-gay myths into gangster terms, his contemporary Ke Xingpei was directing a remake of *Golden Swallow* itself. After nearly two decades of the crude martial

The screening on Fri 17 Jul will be introduced by Vicki Brown, co-founder of the MilkTea collective

Bullets and Brotherhood: The Films of John Woo

A Better Tomorrow Ying hung boon sik

Fri 3 Jul 18:15 (+ intro by Dr Lin Feng, University of Leicester); Sat 18 Jul 18:15

A Better Tomorrow II Ying hung boon sik II

Fri 3 Jul 20:50; Sat 18 Jul 20:45

The Killer Dip huet seung hung

Sat 4 Jul 20:45; Fri 17 Jul 18:05 (+ intro by Vicki Brown, co-founder of the MilkTea collective)

Once a Thief Chung hang sei hoi

Sun 5 Jul 18:10; Thu 16 Jul 20:30

Hard Target

Tue 7 Jul 18:20; Fri 17 Jul 20:40; Wed 29 Jul 20:50

Bullet in the Head Dip huet gai tau

Wed 8 Jul 20:20 (+ intro by film critic Katie Smith-Wong); Tue 21 Jul 20:25

Hard Boiled Lat sau san taam

Sat 11 Jul 20:30; Wed 22 Jul 20:20 (+ intro by Xavier Alexandre Pillai, BFI TV Programmer); Sat 25 Jul 14:45

25 and Under: An Introduction to John Woo

Thu 16 Jul 18:15 BFI Blue Room

Face/Off

Fri 24 Jul 18:05; Fri 31 Jul 20:20

Red Cliff Part I Chi bi + **Red Cliff Part II**

Chi bi: Jue zhan tian xia

Sat 25 Jul 17:00

Become a BFI Member

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

Sight and Sound

Never miss an issue with **Sight and Sound**, the BFI's internationally renowned film magazine.

Subscribe from just £25*

* Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK only). More info:

sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk/subscribe

SIGHT AND SOUND

BFI Player

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

Darwinism found in kung-fu movies and their spin-offs, Hong Kong culture is clearly hankering after the more chivalrous days of heroes who 'act like they have a dream', as Lee here describes Jeff.

It is probably this very nostalgia that saves *The Killer* from the innate hollowness of most genre commentaries. The film is, in every conceivable sense, full-blooded. It has an almost flawless thriller plot (no holes, no glaring implausibilities, no hard-to-take coincidences), but wastes no time on establishing or bridging scenes and keeps expository dialogue to the barest minimum. It is mounted as a rhapsody, complete with languorous dissolves and tightly integrated spasms of slow motion. It centres on ultra-charismatic performances from Chow Yun-fat (widely recognised as Hong Kong's finest actor) and Danny Lee (a one-time stalwart of Shaw Brothers schlock, here liberated by his ambiguous role), but is never shy of subordinating them to the needs of the visual rhetoric. Even the steady escalation of the violence – by the end, the corpse count has reached three figures and thousands of rounds of ammunition have been fired – is slightly muted by the mood of romantic fatalism that drenches the proceedings, enhanced by the elegiac score commissioned from Lowell Lowe. In short, the film works to earn its genre stripes. In its serenely overstated way, it is as resonant and emotive as the 'classics' it refers to.

Two sequences in particular merit a place in genre anthologies of the future, both designed to explore the fundamental similarity between criminal and cop. One is the meeting of Jeff and Lee in Jennie's apartment; the two men, with cocked handguns at each other's heads, pretend to be childhood chums while the unsuspecting blind woman bustles between them, trying to serve them tea. The other is the calm before the storm in the church, where the sweet nothings exchanged by Jeff and Lee are punctuated by flash cutaways to Sydney's fantastically brutal beating at the hands of Weng; the conjunction of male romance and male sadomasochism lifts a characteristic trait of the genre to a new high. Since completing *The Killer*, which did only half as well as *A Better Tomorrow* at the Hong Kong box-office, Woo has left Film Workshop and formed his own company. His inaugural production *Bullet in the Head* is taking a worryingly long time to bring to completion; its release date has already been postponed three times. It may yet turn out that *The Killer* marks a watershed in his career: a rhapsodic genre commentary than cannot be capped.

Tony Rayns, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, September 1990