

The hollywoodization of asian film directors the works of john woo, ang lee argum...

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Given the increasing globalization of the film industry, Hollywood directors have begun to pull increasingly from international sources for their creative output. Looking into the small-but-potent international film markets, often directors from other countries are given the opportunity to cross-over into Hollywood. This is certainly the case with Asian cinema; many Asian film directors who have achieved success in Japan and Hong Kong have been given the chance to make films in America in order to provide a rapidly-consuming film market with the variety and quality it desires. In the 1980s and 1990s, two Asian directors in particular crossed over into Hollywood in order to make English-language films - Hong Kong director John Woo and Taiwanese filmmaker Ang Lee. While these two directors focused on somewhat disparate genres and styles of filmmaking, their successful entry into Hollywood demonstrated the West's desire to adopt the techniques and talent of Asian cinema into their own market.

John Woo

In the 1980s, the American action film market was booming, as it was the era of the action hero - actors like Sylvester Stallone, Bruce Willis, and Arnold Schwarzenegger frequently topped the box office with their larger-than-life, bloody shootouts and displays of machismo and sheer strength. Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, Hong Kong directors like Tsui Hark and John Woo were making slicker, more stylized and frenetic action films, often referred to as 'bullet operas.' Woo, in particular, was one of the most celebrated directors of that genre - films like *A Better Tomorrow*, *The Killer*

and *Hard Boiled* featured fast-paced, intricately choreographed shootouts that involve a tremendous amount of energy and movement (Chung, 2000). A far cry from the lumbering, alpha-male Rambos and Terminators of the American action film market, Woo stars like Chow Yun-Fat sprinted across action scenes, interacting with their environment and enemies as if in a dance, making for a uniquely beautiful blend the old-school gangster shootout and the kung fu action sequence (Rampal, 2005). Slow motion was a technique used with great relish in these films, lending each movement a grandeur that was not often found in rough-and-tumble gangster movies in America at the time. Woo's films were always deeply melodramatic, soap-opera-like films about the nature of loyalty and honor, with brooding heroes clashing with gung-ho policemen in order to save their own souls (Rampal, 2005). Woo's films carry with them a decidedly Gothic energy to them - doves symbolically fly past characters in slow-motion on many occasions, and the climax of *The Killer* features a shootout in a Catholic church. Based on the success of these films, John Woo began his crossover career in Hollywood, essentially being asked to make the same types of movies (stylish action flicks) as in his early career in Hong Kong (Higbee & Lum, 2010). While his crossover status only lasted until the mid-2000s, several of his films followed the same basic formula, essentially adapting the dark-gangster bullet-opera style to tried and true American films (Chung, 2000). His first, *Hard Target*, starring Jean-Claude Van Damme, featured the same kinds of bullet opera antics as his previous films, but significantly toned down - the film became much more of a traditional Van Damme movie, complete with high kicks, one-liners and sneering American bad guys.

Exchanging the streets of Hong Kong for an apocalyptically-drawn New Orleans, *Hard Target* showcases Woo's ability to "[transform] local film genres, with all their culture-specific symbols and meanings, into spectacles for cultural consumption on an international scale" (Lu 1997, p. 16).

While *Hard Target* (and his following film, the middling *Broken Arrow*) provided a transition for Woo into the American film market, his next few films allowed him to push even more of his style into his filmmaking. *Face-Off*, the 1997 film in which John Travolta and Nicolas Cage play men on opposite sides of the law who must deal with the consequences of an experimental face-swap, provides what is possibly Woo's most direct translation of the Hong Kong bullet opera style to an American film. *Face-Off* features many of Woo's infamously Catholic imagery, including Nicolas Cage's initial costume as a priest carrying two golden pistols, a Mexican standoff in yet another cathedral, and more. Slow-motion glamour shots appear even more frequently (as do the use of fluttering doves), and the two dueling characters are dressed in fancy suits, matching the kind of sharp wardrobe Chow Yun-Fat would wear in *The Killer* or *Hard Boiled*. The story itself is also the same kind of tale Woo would craft with his Hong Kong films – the film is centered on the disparate minds of its two protagonists, depicting their struggles with their own identity and their rivalry in typical melodramatic fashion. The acting style of the entire cast is elevated to the kind of showiness that is typical of Hong Kong action films, and a comparatively Eastern presentationalism when placed against the dour naturalism of Western acting. John Travolta and Nic Cage essentially perform camp impressions of each other, who are in turn doing impressions of

themselves, allowing for over-the-top facial expressions and shouted dialogue from both characters. Through these changes, *Face/Off* becomes the most Asianized Hollywood action film to date, acting as an indicator of the desire of Hollywood to adapt to the changing cult appeal of the Hong Kong bullet opera.

Ang Lee

Unlike his colleague John Woo, Ang Lee's international appeal lay in something other than an overt, distinct style to his action films – prior to his breakout success in America, Lee made personal relationship and family dramas, such as *Pushing Hands* and *Eat Drink Man Woman*; these films featured slowly-paced, contemplative depictions of the Taiwanese family unit and how they interacted with each other in their daily lives (Lu, 1997). Lee's films, especially in his native home, were profoundly spiritual; *Eat Drink Man Woman* takes its title from a work by Confucius, and its central conflict lies in the differences between generations in a family that practices Confucianism. Lee's films are sumptuously filmed, deliberate in their pace, and subtle in their depictions of human drama and spirituality, bringing with him a sense of contemplation that is the polar opposite of Woo's operatic bombast (Lu, 1997).

Lee was largely unencumbered when it came to adapting his style to American films; his first in the States, *Sense and Sensibility*, allowed Lee to bring his unique sense of social satire to this 19th-century English romance. The film itself has a very dry sense of humor, in keeping with Lee's previous work, and is incredibly restrained in its depiction of the characters; everyone

behaves with subtlety and nuance, and the changes in the romantic relationships between its main characters are shown with a mixture of warmth and tragedy. This is endemic of Lee's particular; y universal style of direction: " Lee's film art, as a paradigmatic case of transnationalism, not only crosses national boundaries but also consolidates national and local identities in uncanny ways" (Lu 1997, p. 14). Based on the success of that, Lee moved on to many other restrained ensemble historical dramas, including *The Ice Storm* (a family drama taking place during the 1960s), *Ride with the Devil* (a raucous Western starring Tobey Maguire), and *Hulk* (a contemplative adaptation of the Marvel superhero) (Chung, 2000).

Perhaps Lee's biggest successes have been with films in which he introduced American audiences to his Asian roots – *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, a Chinese wuxia tale of swords and intrigue, won Best Picture at the Academy Awards, and was filmed with an international audience in mind. For example, the other actors, including Woo mainstay Chow Yun-Fat and former Bond girl Michelle Yeoh, were already introduced to American audiences (Klein, 2004). His later film, *Lust, Caution*, took place in early 20th-century Shanghai, and presented both an exotically erotic tale of intrigue in historical China and a familiar tale of war, loyalty, and female espionage (the film premiered in America around the time of the Valerie Plane scandal) (Chen, Hwang and Ling, 2008). To that end, Lee found a way to incorporate Asian settings and themes into his American-produced films, allowing him to find mainstream success on both halves of the globe.

Both John Woo and Ang Lee represent the unique aspects of Asian cinema that international audiences latched onto in the 1980s and 1990s, which

they wanted to replicate in their own industry. With Woo, it was a case of desiring a change from the American style of action film into a sleeker, more operatic and kinetic approach, leading him to successfully cross over and adapt his particular brand of blood-soaked melodrama to American audiences. In the case of Lee, his type of spiritual restraint and biting social satire permitted Western audiences to find his films already accessible, giving him an easy path to success from *Sense and Sensibility* to his more recent efforts, like *Brokeback Mountain* and *Life of Pi*. Consequently, his accessible style made his more Asian-themed works (e. g. *Crouching Tiger*) digestible to American audiences as well. While both directors are examples of cultural crossover into Hollywood from Asia, they did so in different ways while satisfying different needs.

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