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The Man's Film:

Woo and the Pleasures of Male Melodrama

Philippa Gates

John Woo, the renowned action filmmaker from Hong Kong, and his films are celebrated by critics and enjoyed by audiences for their scenes of excessive violence and mass destruction. His films may be seen as firmly in the genre of the action film - a genre associated with a male audience; however, the reviews of his films describe them in terms that are usually associated with melodrama - a genre associated with a female audience. Terrence Rafferty in a review of *Broken Arrow* (1996) for the *New Yorker* says:

At their best, [Woo's] movies build to a near-hysterical pitch of cheeky ingenuity and violent excess, and, because they are, for the most part, defiantly unrealistic, their brutality has a giddy, oddly innocent quality. (97)

David Bordwell in his book on Hong Kong cinema states:

The Killer is a triumph of sheer romanticism, recycling clichés with unabashed conviction: the blinded beloved who needs an operation, the innocents wounded in the crossfire, the crook who must pull one last job, the cop who becomes fascinated with his quarry, the aging professional who recovers his dignity in a final act of courage. Each element is pushed to the limit, steeped in sentiment, swathed in dreamy hyperbolic. (106)

Lastly, Verina Glaessner in her article on Woo in *Sight and Sound* says:

Beneath a thick wrapping of wordless and extended scenes of destructive mayhem, [*Hard-Boiled*] contains a meditation on personal and national identity and its loss.... Menace is generated not merely from stunt pyrotechnics but also from Woo's Oshima-like awareness of the threat contained in sterile modernist spaces and the fragility of the human body. (42)

The terms used by Rafferty to describe Woo's films - hysterical, excess, and unrealistic - are terms frequently used to describe the visual qualities of melodrama; those used by Bordwell to describe Woo's film *The Killer* (1989) - romanticism, recycling clichés, steeped in sentiment, and hyperbolic - are terms often used to describe the narratives of melodrama; and the ideas raised by Glaessner in relation to *Hard-Boiled* (1992) - muteness ("wordless"), physical gesture replacing verbal expression for the ineffable, and buildings, objects, and interiors expressing the psychic and emotional states of the characters - are characteristics of melodrama. Although these critics may not have consciously intended to, they have described Woo's work in terms usually reserved for melodrama not the action film.

The term melodrama is most often associated with films of pathos and heightened emotionality including the woman's film and family melodramas. However, as Ben Singer states in his discussion of the serial queen melodrama - an action genre of the 1910s and 1920s starring female heroes - melodrama was initially a term used by the industry to describe films with "action, thrilling sensationalism, and physical violence" (95).

"Melodrama" as it is used today is all but synonymous with a set of sub-genres that remain close to the hearth and emphasize a register of heightened emotionalism and sentimentality. . . . But this was not the principle usage, nor perhaps even one at all, in the early years of the film industry. (ibid 95)

Steve Neale also argues that during the Classical Hollywood period, specifically between 1938 and 1960, the film industry originally used the term melodrama not for describing the films directed at female audiences, but for "war films, adventure films, horror films, and thrillers, genres traditionally thought of as, if anything, 'male'" ("Melo Talk" 69). According to Neale, during this period the use of the term melodrama to describe women's films was rare (ibid 74). The redefinition of the term melodrama to refer to films that are close to the hearth seems to have occurred with critics revisiting films from the 1940s and 50s that had been previously dismissed as women's films or weepies.¹ As Lea Jacobs points out, melodrama was a term

applied to active genres in the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries, and the definition of the term employed by film studies today is a misnomer (122). John Woo's films belong to the male genre of action film and, thus, would fall under what Neale and Singer define as the original use of the term melodrama. However, I would argue that Woo's films are melodramatic in either application of the term because his films are not only overflowing with scenes of action and violence but also are saturated with scenes of pathos and emotionality.

Discussions of melodrama as generated in relation to the woman's film and family melodramas of the 1940s and 50s center around the notion that through moments of excess a "reading against the grain" of the text is possible, a reading that will reveal meanings opposite to those that are apparent at the surface of the text. In the 1980s and early 90s film critics like Christine Gledhill, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, and Mary Ann Doane argue that these oppositional meanings are Marxist and/or feminist in reaction against the capitalist and/or patriarchal agenda of Western film and society. Woo's films are male melodrama and produced within an Eastern society and, therefore, demand a reworking of the definition of melodrama and an understanding of what kind of readings melodrama can facilitate. Just as Singer's discussion of the serial queen melodrama redefines the violent action/adventure genre as not just a male genre, so too will this paper demonstrate that Woo's violent action films redefine melodrama as applicable to not just female genres. This paper will explore how Woo's Hong Kong films are male melodrama and how his filmmaking and thematics have been affected by his relocation to Hollywood. Lastly, this paper will discuss how it is the melodramatic nature of his Hong Kong films that make them so popular with audiences on both sides of the Pacific: texts that audiences read for pleasure.

Melodrama

Melodrama is regarded as a form of expression that disrupts the realism of a text to allow for subversive and alternate meanings to surface and be read. According to Gledhill, the

appeal of the melodramatic film to critics is that while the classic realist text of Hollywood and other Western film industries reproduce bourgeois ideology, the subversive construction of the melodramatic film disrupts that classic realism (8-9). Peter Brooks states that “melodrama refuses repression, or rather, repeatedly strives for moments where repression is broken through, to the physical and verbal staging of the essential” (“Melodrama, Body, Revolution” 19). A film text has two levels: the surface - the plane of representation - and the depth - the plane of signification (*Melodramatic Imagination* 146). The ineffable, that which cannot be articulated, is displaced into visual signification at the level of representation in moments of excess in *mise-en-scène*, emotion, music, and gesture. In a manner similar to the hysterical body in psychoanalysis, the surface of the melodramatic text exhibits symptoms of excess that relate to/are caused by the contradictions present beneath a surface that cannot contain them. Like the woman’s film and the family melodrama, the Hong Kong films of John Woo are texts marked by excesses in *mise-en-scène*, music, and emotion that rupture the realism at the plane of representation. Woo’s films have an added emphasis on action which is not present in the women’s genres,² and it is the element of action that is the most excessive in its representation and that initiates the greatest moments of rupture in the film. Nowell-Smith argues that in the melodramatic text there is a repression of the social and psychic contradictions apparent within the bourgeois ideology of which the film is a product; however, this repression cannot be contained within the text and so excesses in the text arise, rupturing the realism of the text and allowing for the contradictions to come to the surface and be read by the viewer (73-74).

Just as Nowell-Smith argues for a “reading against the grain” to uncover a hidden Marxist ideology present in the text, so too do feminist critics argue that a “reading against the grain” can reveal a feminist ideology.³ I disagree with Nowell-Smith’s assertion that the contradictions present beneath the surface of the film are necessarily bourgeois and against feminist critics that the contradictions are necessarily feminist. The discussion of melodrama has been mainly restricted to Western films and a critique of the Western societies that produce

them; however, John Woo's Hong Kong films were produced from a perspective distinct from that of Hollywood films as they are the products of a different society and a different ideology. The emphasis of the contradictions exposed in the films of the women's genres are usually concerned with gender, family, and the role of women in a patriarchal society, whereas the contradictions exposed in Woo's films are those which exist between society and the masculinity of the hero. In each film there is a juxtaposition of the apparent hypermasculinity at the surface of the text and the suggestions of vulnerability, emasculation, and homoeroticism revealed through moments of melodramatic excess.

“Both *A Better Tomorrow* and *The Killer* are male melodramas...(Stringer 30). Julian Stringer argues that these films are masculinist texts combining the two types of genre that Nowell-Smith defines: the male “doing” genres - Westerns and war films - and the female suffering genres - melodrama and the woman's film (29). Combining the two paradigms into one, Woo's films have heroes who are doing *and* suffering (ibid 30). I agree with Stringer's notion that the heroes of Woo's Hong Kong films combine two kinds of masculinity - a man of action and a man who suffers; however, Stringer argues that Woo's films *combine* the gangster film with the melodrama (30). Woo's films are not a combination of action and melodrama but are melodrama *because* of the action as well as the emotion. Stringer seems to regard Woo's films as consisting of two halves - “suffering” and “doing” - and as melodramatic because Woo adds suffering heroes to an action genre; however, I would argue that it is not just the “suffering” half of Woo's films that are melodramatic but also the “doing” half. Because of the manner in which Woo constructs, directs, and edits his scenes of action and violence, they are excessive. It is not only the scenes of emotion and pathos but also the scenes of action and spectacle that make Woo's films male melodrama. The films are not simply saturated with emotion *and* violence but it is the emotionality of the male hero - his loyalty and devotion to other men - from which the excess of violence erupts: pathos evokes destruction. Although Stringer agrees that Woo's Hong Kong films are male melodrama, he does not address the shift

of these concerns with Woo's move to Hollywood. I will examine this shift later in this paper, however, in the next section I will look at how the definition of melodrama as purported by its critics like Gledhill, Nowell-Smith, and Doane, in terms of melodrama's excess and the "readings against the grain" made possible through that excess, can be applied to not just woman's films but men's films as well by considering Woo's Hong Kong films. I will address, firstly, the moments of excess in emotion and violence that occur at the level of narrative and also of spectacle in his films, and secondly, the readings that those moments of excess allow especially in terms of homoerotic pleasure at the level of narrative and of spectacle. Neale remarks that heterosexual masculinity has been identified as a structuring norm in relation to images of both women and gay men ("Masculinity as Spectacle" 9); however, I would argue, and the proliferation of men's studies in all disciplines in recent years attests, that heterosexual masculinity is not as unproblematic and as uniform as previously considered. According to feminist critics, female spectators seek pleasure from a woman's film through the film's address of female subjectivity and desire;⁴ surely male spectators also yearn for the address of *real* male subjectivity and desire and not just the representation of the fantasies of masculinity as churned out by Hollywood. Woo's films are not realistic texts but through their moments of melodramatic excess they do address issues of male bonding, emotionality, and desire that Hollywood would not dare to explore.

Melodramatic Excess: Pathos/Violence

A melodrama can then be defined as a text characterized by moments of excess in *mise-en-scène*, emotion, music, and gesture which disrupt the realism of the text and, thus, subvert the surface meaning or ideology of the text (whatever that ideology may be). Woo's films are melodrama because they are overflowing with excess of emotion and violence - at the level of the narrative as well as at that of the spectacle. In terms of the narrative, Woo's films are punctuated by scenes of excessive pathos and emotionality most often between the male

protagonist and another man; in terms of the spectacle, the films are defined by scenes of excessive action and violence where the two men must prove their loyalty to one another, often with one of the men sacrificing his life for the other. On the surface of Woo's films a discourse of hypermasculinity and manliness is endorsed as the heroes fight, shoot, and kill their enemies. Heterosexual coupling is also promoted as the male bonds formed throughout the film are broken with the death of one of the two men, and the hero finds comfort in a "healthy" male/female relationship. The moments of excess in narrative and spectacle, however, puncture and disrupt the realism of the film to allow the spectator to read the film "against the grain" and against these surface endorsements and to enjoy the subversive pleasure of the intense and homoerotically charged relationships developed in the films.

Loyalty, betrayal, and male-bonding are the main themes common to all of Woo's Hong Kong films, including *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), *The Killer* (1989), and *Hard-Boiled* (1992), and the films are less about exploring the individual protagonists, as about the relationship which exists between them. At the beginning of each film two men who share a strong bond of friendship are torn apart by the actions of the villain in the film. It is the forced premature ending of the men's relationship by death or betrayal that haunts the protagonist (played by Chow Yun-Fat in all three films) throughout the film, and empowers him to defeat his enemy who ruptured that bond. For the protagonist, a second relationship with another man always succeeds this first disrupted friendship. This friendship is established during the course of the film, and the loyalty of the two men is tested in the final battle scene in which one man must demonstrate the strength of his devotion to the other. Usually this test entails the friend sacrificing his life for the hero to achieve success. The moments of violence in Woo's films mirror the moments of emotion, following the same pattern and occurring in the same scenes. Firstly, I will discuss the moments of intense emotion and the moments of excessive violence and, secondly, the "readings against the grain" which they allow.

In the final scene of *A Better Tomorrow*, Mark (Chow Yun-Fat) dies tragically as he attempts to reconcile the differences between the two brothers, Ho (Lung Ti) and Kit (Leslie Cheung). He sacrifices his life to bring them back together and then Ho, in turn, sacrifices his freedom to make Kit a hero in the police department by forcing Kit to arrest him. These two scenes of intense emotion - Mark's death and Ho's arrest - occur in the middle of their violent gunfight with the crime syndicate. Slow motion coupled with the silent reactions from each of the three men is used to capture and extend the moments of emotionality. The camera holds Mark's face in close-up as in slow motion the bullet enters the back of his head and sprays blood out of his forehead. Then the camera shows Kit's face in close-up as blood sprays from Mark's forehead onto his face, pausing for his reaction of horror before regular speed and sound is returned to the scene. Similarly, later in the sequence, Shing, the villain, walks away from Ho whose gun is empty. In slow motion, Kit arrives at Ho's side to reveal his loaded weapon to Ho. Ho draws the gun from Kit's side, the two exchanging knowing and trusting looks, and then he shoots Shing as revenge for Mark's death. At the end of *Hard-Boiled*, Allan (Tony Leung Chiu Wai) must kill the villain, Johnny, or allow his friend Tequila (Chow Yun-Fat) to humiliate himself at Johnny's whim to save his own life. Allan chooses to be heroic, and in slow motion grabs the weapon Johnny is holding to his head and shoots the gun through his own body to kill Johnny. The relationships that develop between the two men in each of these films, whether the relationship between the two friends who are divided at the beginning of the film or the two friends who prove their loyalty to one another at the end, are highly emotionally charged. It is the emotion that is generated between these men in scenes of intense joy, anger, or sacrifice which drives the film's narrative forward and which ignites the scenes of violence and mass destruction that occur.

The scenes of excessive action and violence occur in the same pattern as the scenes of heightened emotionality. Although each film begins and ends with shoot outs, the level of violence escalates through the course of the film culminating in a final scene of mass

destruction. *Hard-Boiled* is perhaps the most famous example of this progression in violence because it was Woo's biggest budget film to date. As Woo himself admits, most of the extra money went into more and better pyrotechnics (Rafferty 97). The final fight sequence lasts for over thirty minutes of screen time, and involves the shooting of a few hundred innocent hospital patients and the blowing up of an entire building. However, because it is almost cartoon-like, the mass scale violence in Woo's films is never disturbing in its excess. In fact, it is the individual beatings given to the heroes and the single bullets that take their lives that are much more emotionally engaging. The scenes of mass slaughter are digestible and thrilling because it is the nameless and faceless who perish. The fluidity and dance-like quality of the choreography and cinematography of the scenes allows the audience to remain distanced from the death in the scenes and to indulge in the spectacle. Critics describe the action in Woo's films as balletic: Stephen Teo in his description of the gunplay (178); Bey Logan, of the deaths (123); and Jillian Sandell, of the shoot-outs (23). Woo says, "When I shoot action sequences I think of great dancers, Gene Kelly, Astaire. In action I feel like I'm creating a ballet, a dance" (Weinraub B5). Tom Tunney argues that Woo's directorial style with scenes of violence lends itself as much to a comparison to Busby Berkeley as to Sam Peckinpah (47). Berkeley's anonymous women dancing, in a Woo film, become anonymous bodies dying, and the pyrotechnics and firepower are celebrated for their own "decorative aesthetic of destruction" (ibid 47).

The emotional and the violent in Woo's film are entwined - two halves of the same moment. The first scene of each film, in which violence disrupts the relationship between the two men, is that which sparks the hero's emotional response; and it is the final sequence of mass destruction that puts the greatest stress on the relationship between the hero and his new friend, also evoking emotion. Although it seems that the emotion is a result of the violence that occurs, instead, it is the violence that is motivated by the emotion. This is indicated through the editing and intercutting of the scenes. Woo's editing is often much more rapid and jarring than

that of Hollywood film in general, and the effect of his use of editing is most obvious in his intercutting of two scenes juxtaposed by tone. For example, in *The Killer*, Sydney, Jeff's best friend, is beaten for defending Jeff. This scene of violence is rapidly intercut with the conversation between Jeff and the cop, Dumbo, as they cement their bonds of friendship. The scene of Sydney's death is very violent and that of Jeff and Dumbo, very touching. The rapid intercutting between the two marks that the motivation for both actions is the same: loyalty and friendship. Often the final scene of violence in the film is motivated by the memory of the first scene of violence in the film that continues to haunt the hero. The scene of the memory is intercut with the scene of the hero enacting his revenge. For Jeff in *The Killer* it is his accidental blinding of Jennie that motivates his revenge on the syndicate from which he tried to escape; for Ho in *A Better Tomorrow* it is the memory of his friendship with Mark that inspires the avenging of his death; and for Tequila in *Hard-Boiled* it is his remembrance of his friend killed at the tea house that induces him to fight Johnny and his men. Memories of intense emotion motivate the violence that occurs.

Although other action genres including Hollywood's gangster and Western genres can exhibit similar emotional motivations for violence, what distinguishes Woo's films is that they are melodrama and the melodrama arises from the moments of excess in the *mise-en-scène*. In terms of spectacle, Woo often disregards the narrative, realism, and time (through slow motion cinematography) for the sake of moments of pure visual excess, for instance the scene in *Hard Target* in which the camera follows the advance of the crossbow arrow as it flies at its target, or the final scene of *Hard-Boiled* which lasts for over thirty minutes and in which hundreds of people are massacred, or the motorcycle show-down in *Mission: Impossible II* (2000) in which Tom Cruise and Doug Gray Scott perform an impossible array of moves. As Robert Hanke remarks, Woo's films seem to be structured "around set pieces where a hyperkinetic choreography of gun violence and explosive pyrotechnics seemed to be privileged over plot, narrative, or character" (41) and it is these moments of excessive violence, gunplay, and

explosions that privilege the *mise-en-scène* over the narrative, plot, and characters and that make the films melodrama. Woo's action sequences are considered the most skillful and thrilling in terms of action cinematography and spectacular *mise-en-scène* and are the reason that he is so popular with American audiences and so praised by critics. There is an unreality to his violence that makes it thrilling and yet palatable. By Hollywood standards, the body count of his Hong Kong films is too high, the violence too destructive, and the bloodshed too prolific and, yet, it is Woo's skillful direction and filming of these elements that make him admired and praised as an action director. The action genre is not a critically acclaimed one as it is regarded as interested more in generating box office profit than in producing art, but within this popular genre Woo is seen as an artist. He is also distinguished from other action genre directors because of his investigation and representation of male relationships.

Woo's films showcase an intimacy between the male characters that is lacking in Hollywood action films. Hollywood action films often place two men at the center of the film as buddies, however, there is a decided disavowal of any eroticism between the two through an emphasis on the hero's heterosexuality (through his attractiveness to women or the presence of a girlfriend or wife) and a focus on male intimacy as occurring only in the line of duty when fighting the enemy. Woo's films, on the other hand, foreground the intimacy forged between the men to a point where their relationship can imply homoerotic overtones. In the next section of this paper I will demonstrate how the homoeroticism in the films is disavowed in the final scenes through heterosexual coupling, yet the intimacy experienced between the two men is not contained and resonates beyond the socially acceptable conclusions of the films. Woo's male characters are differentiated from the typical action hero of Hollywood film as embodied by Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jean-Claude Van Damme, Bruce Willis or Mel Gibson because of their evident vulnerability in opposition to the Hollywood's tough heroes. Hanke regards *Face/Off* (1997) as representing a generic transformation whereby Woo has brought to Hollywood a new kind of hero - one that is physically violent but also emotionally

intense; however, this transformation is not merely a matter of altering the image of the male action hero because it is dependent upon Woo's aesthetic which combines spectacular violence with melodrama (39-40). The pleasure offered to the audience with Woo's films is the melodramatic excess of spectacular violence erupting from the emotionality of a vulnerable but heroic masculinity and his bonding with other men.

Melodramatic Excess: Heterosexual/Homoerotic

Woo's films conclude with the socially acceptable ending of heterosexual coupling. Kit is initially denied the happy home he had at the beginning of *A Better Tomorrow*. He had his father and brother, but his father is killed and Ho is sent to prison. The story follows Kit's development from being an out-of-control adolescent to being his own man. At the end of the film he has completed his metamorphosis and is embraced into society within a happy union with his girlfriend, Jackie. Tequila faces a similar transition to embracing his manly responsibilities. At the beginning of *Hard-Boiled* he is kicked out by his girlfriend whom he has not been treating well, and pursues his friendship with Allan instead. At the end of the film through his actions to save the innocent at the hospital, and through his mutual affection with Theresa for the babies that they save, happy marital and familial bliss is assured for the two of them. To conclude with this happy ending it is necessary that one of the two men in the relationship established during the film must die: the hero must be freed from his adolescent bonds of friendship to pursue a "healthy" heterosexual attachment and the overtones of homoeroticism that the male relationship evoked must be contained. However, this move towards heterosexual coupling is undermined by the emphasis expressed in the moments of excess in *mise-en-scène*, action, and emotionality on the strength of the male couple. Neale argues that the tension between "social integration through marriage" and the "resistance to social standards and responsibilities" is expressed through the melodramatic moments ("Masculinity as Spectacle" 15). Woo's heroes achieve a bond with each other that is

emotionally superior to that which they achieve with the women, a connection that empowers and drives them to their heroic deeds. At best, the women function as mediators to bring the men together. In *Hard-Boiled*, Theresa, as the hero's love interest, functions to give the film a happy ending. She is there in the background as Tequila's replacement for Allan when he sacrifices himself to bring down the villain. Similarly, Jackie in *A Better Tomorrow* spends less time trying to improve her relationship with Kit, which flares from affection to discord, and more time in making him reconcile with his brother. Few intimate scenes occur between the heterosexual couples, whereas a multitude of teary-eyed and emotionally charged moments are exchanged between the two men. Indeed, the last shot of each film marks the culmination but also the termination of the male bond, and the women remain somewhere in the background to fulfil their role as the socially acceptable replacement. The homoerotic undertones present in the scenes of emotionality and side-by-side fighting of the male couple are repressed on the surface of the film as the narrative heads towards a heterosexual conclusion.

Just as there is a suppression in the film at the level of narrative of the homosexual implications of the male couple, so too is there a suppression at the level of spectacle of the homoerotic implications of identification for the male viewer. Doane argues that the contradictions which arise in the woman's film through the moments of excess are a result of the film's inability to reconcile the fact that a female subjectivity is denied by film's patriarchal subjectivity, and yet these films are produced for a female audience, implying that a female subjectivity exists (13). Tensions also arise in Woo's films because of the inability to reconcile the implied heterosexual subjectivity of the male by the films being geared to a heterosexual male audience, and the homosexual implications of the erotic look that are repressed through the mutilation of the male body. The extended scenes of violence are dominant in Woo's films, and many male bodies are shown in action, and often in slow motion. These scenes unfold in silence, and the only elements that express signification are music and the body in motion. In *The Killer* the scene in the church focuses on Jeff's exposed body as the bullets are removed

from his back. He lies with his stomach and legs on the table but his upper body arches up as he cries in agony at the removal of each bullet - a pose associated with the female body as passive and on display for the male gaze. The camera alternates between this front view exposing his body from his head to his waist, and a view from above and behind him looking at his bullet-ridden back. The scene is very sexualized and the pain experienced by Jeff becomes pleasure for the viewer. As Hanke explains: "It is not only that Chow Yun-Fat's characters perform violence: rather, screen violence is a representation of his relationship to other men, and his screen body is a spectacle of pain and suffering" (45). However, the homoerotic overtones of these scenes of the male body as spectacle are disguised by the justification of them being the non-sexual motivation of mutilation.

The mutilation of the male body is the essence of Woo's action sequences. Male bodies jump, move, are shot, thrown, and mowed down in scenes of mass spectacle. Additional viewing pleasure for the audience is given in moments of slow motion cinematography and the rapid cuts to different angles reveal all the various positions possible from which to witness the destruction of the male body. Neale states that the male body deflects the gaze because in our heterosexual and patriarchal society the male body cannot be marked explicitly as an erotic object of the male look, and, therefore, some other motivation must be offered (other than erotic) to justify the display of the male body ("Masculinity as Spectacle" 13-14). One example is to offer the male body in action (ibid 18). By fragmenting the body through close-ups and offering it running, leaping, and shooting the motivation for the body being a spectacle is the very manly action of violence. Neale agrees with Laura Mulvey that in mainstream cinema the spectatorial look is implicitly male and for this reason the eroticism of the male body must be disguised, repressed, and disavowed (ibid 19). The male viewer is invited to look at and enjoy the spectacle of that body without having to deal with the homosexual implications of that pleasure, as indeed he would if the male body was offered in a passive display as is traditionally the woman's (ibid 18). The mutilation of the male body on screen allows for the

viewer to indulge in the erotic look, receiving pleasure from the physical beauty of the male body, but without having to acknowledge the eroticism of it.

The pleasure that the scenes of male emotionality and spectacle of the male body offer the heterosexual male audience is not necessarily the homoerotic overtones they invoke: the male audience member may not consciously acknowledge those overtones. The eroticism is expressed only in the moments of melodramatic excess and is subsequently effaced at the level of the narrative with a conclusion of heterosexual coupling and at the level of the spectacle through the mutilation and action of the male body. In each of his Hong Kong films, Woo delves deeply into the exploration of male intimacy - friendship, loyalty, and devotion - recovering a male subjectivity that seems to be absent from mainstream film. In Woo's films the male body is exhibited as strong, beautiful, and wounded, and the men as heroic, emotional, and chivalrous. The devotion and loyalty to their friends makes the heroes vulnerable and it is this vulnerability that distinguished Woo's heroes from Hollywood's action heroes. The erotic overtones incited by this representation of the male body and male intimacy do not cause discomfort for the male heterosexual viewer nor, as Sandell states, do they produce "the associated anxiety" which such male relationships in Hollywood films do (23-24). Hollywood avoids anything more than a surface treatment of relationships between male characters unless it is male bonding under extreme circumstances where the men are required repeatedly to prove their masculinity through violent acts to efface any erotic overtones which the male bonding might incite. Sandell argues that the Hollywood buddy action film is "full of nervous jokes about violence being a substitute for sex, and anxieties about what it means to be a man" (33). Woo's action heroes, on the other hand, do not have to prove their manliness to negate the implications of their male bonding. Their relationships offer the male heterosexual viewer pleasure with or without an acknowledgement of the erotic overtones incited by them because those relationships represent an exploration into male emotionality beyond heterosexual coupling and beyond what Hollywood film chooses, and what American culture is able, to

offer audiences.

“Part of what makes Woo’s movies so much fun is that he never allows anything - not reality, or narrative coherence, or concern for the audience’s ability to absorb the non-stop, high-impact thrills - to slow him down” (Rafferty 98). The elements that Rafferty seems to think are potential flaws in Woo’s film, and are only saved from that derogatory labeling because they make the films “fun”, are actually the fundamental elements that make the films melodrama. The films’ lack of realism, the emphasis on spectacle during the scenes of destruction rather than on the deaths of the anonymous victims, and the complexity of the narrative due to its fast pacing and cutting are the elements which rupture the surface of the text allowing the plane of signification to be expressed and read by the distanced viewer. On the surface Woo’s films end with social and moral order restored, but expressed in the moments of excess are the contradictions that are being repressed. Heterosexual coupling may tack a socially acceptable ending on to each of Woo’s films; however, the homoerotic tension of the male bonding between the heroes escapes the conclusion of the narrative and it is the intimacy between the two men that audiences remember and take pleasure in.

From Hong Kong to Hollywood

During the 1990s Woo made the move to Hollywood to make action films in America and has been criticized for seemingly sacrificing his personal style to be successful in the American market: for sacrificing his melodramatic themes in favor of making a more generic kind of action film. Manhola Dargis contends that, while Woo’s Hong Kong filmmaking altered Hollywood action filmmaking from the work of directors like Quentin Tarantino and John McTiernan, Hollywood has, in turn, altered Woo’s filmmaking (12). Dargis argues that Woo’s work has become less personal and “as the Hollywood action film has become more Woo-like, the director himself seems increasingly less so” (12). Pei-Chi Chung argues that Woo has replaced the strong male relationships with heterosexual coupling in his American

films and that he has done so in a reaction to, and an appreciation of, Hollywood ideology (44). Similarly, Bordwell argues that in his move to Hollywood film Woo sacrifices “heroic masculine communion in favor of portraying men’s allegiance to their families, presumably an attitude more appealing to the American audience” (113). Lastly, Sandell argues that in Woo’s Hong Kong films the masculinity represented is one “which celebrates both strength and intimacy, and where male bonding can suggest an erotic charge without the associated anxiety such relationships often trigger within the Hollywood action genre” (23-24), whereas in his Hollywood films the representation of masculinity follows much more closely the tradition of the Hollywood buddy action film (33).

I would agree that Woo’s Hollywood films are more subdued than his Hong Kong work in terms of their preoccupation with vulnerable masculinity; however, this does not negate the impact that Woo has had on the aesthetics and thematics of the Hollywood action genre nor mean that he has abandoned his investigation of male relationships. Woo’s Hollywood films still resonate with “a nostalgia for male intimacy” (Sandell 30) and challenge the boundaries of Hollywood’s action genre in terms of the spectacle of violence and the exploration of male bonding. Dargis argues that Hollywood has altered Woo, but the film industry still recognizes Woo as something different - the master of the action film - hence the anticipation of his directing the biggest release of summer 2000, *Mission: Impossible II*, with one of Hollywood’s biggest stars, Tom Cruise. In response to Chung’s criticism that Woo’s Hollywood films move towards a heterosexual conclusion, I would point out that Woo’s films have always headed towards the socially palatable conclusion of heterosexual coupling and that often in his Hollywood films the coupling seems as artificial as it did in his Hong Kong films, for example in *Broken Arrow*; or that the heterosexual relationship seems realistic but pales in comparison to the bond formed and played out between the men who were once friends in Woo’s Hong Kong films but, in Hollywood, have become enemies. Bordwell, similarly, sees a sacrifice of male intimacy in favor of the hero’s allegiance to his family in order to appeal to

American audiences; however, I would argue that the relationship between Woo's American hero and his family may tack on a comforting conclusion to each of his Hollywood films, but it is the relationship between the hero and his enemy - Christian Slater and John Travolta, Nicholas Cage and Travolta, Tom Cruise and Dougray Scott - that the viewer remembers and enjoys about the film. As Chung states "although Woo's directorial style in Hollywood emphasizes the use of a mobile camera, saturated gemlike light, freeze frames, and thunderstorms of gunfire, his reputation as an *auteur* still comes from his manipulation of physical and emotional elements in an intense male relationship" (43). Although critics would argue that it is Woo's attempt to adapt to Hollywood filmmaking which has caused mixed reactions to his recent work, I would argue that the problems that critics and audiences have with *Broken Arrow*, and perhaps even *Face/Off* and *Mission: Impossible II*, is that Woo's fascination with male intimacy and his melodramatic aesthetic overshadow the heterosexual coupling and narrative realism that audiences expect from a Hollywood film.

Hollywood action films lack the emotional, vulnerable, and team-working heroes of Woo's films, and the tension between the standard conventions of the action genre and the opposing impulses of Woo's direction are notably expressed in his film *Broken Arrow* (1996). Woo's second American-made feature left some audiences and critics confused because it is not the "standard-issue doomsday thriller" as was expected with its release and there was "very little of the fate-of-the-world-in-the-balance tension" that would be expected from a film in which two nuclear weapons are stolen by a power hungry madman (Rafferty 97). The film seems to fall flat by American action film standards because of the moments of narrative incoherence and the atypical rapid editing between scenes that alternates abruptly from moments of emotion to moments of aggressive violence without the usual time allowed for absorption. John Woo says, "And I made it like a chase movie. Like *North by Northwest*. A chase movie about betrayal, about friendship" (Weinraub B5). The film lacks a sense of coherence because the script emphasizes the action and heterosexual coupling of Riley (Slater)

and Terry (Samantha Mathis) - the hero and his park ranger assistant - and Woo, in his direction of the film, emphasizes the themes of friendship and betrayal and the relationship between the male couple - Riley and Vic (Travolta). The moments of excess of emotion, the rapid editing, the narrative incoherence, the vulnerability of the hero, Riley, and the emphasis on his relationship with Vic over that of his love interest are indigestible for the hardened fan of Hollywood action films, but are in keeping with Woo's melodramatic tendencies in filmmaking.

José Arroyo, in a review for *Sight and Sound*, says: "As an action film, *Broken Arrow* is pretty good. . . . As a John Woo film, however, the best that one can say for *Broken Arrow* is that it is better than *Hard Target*" (40). The consensus with critics seems to be that Woo was making his best films in Hong Kong then came to Hollywood and was confronted with a different mode of film production and a set of expectations held by critics and audiences that he could not live up to. Critics and audiences alike hoped that Woo - by translating his filmmaking style wholesale into Hollywood film - would transform the American action genre, just as he had transformed the Hong Kong action genre and had already influenced Hollywood's through the popularity of his Hong Kong films. In an interview with Lesley O'Toole of *The Times*, Woo admits that the constraints of Hollywood had an impact on his filmmaking when he first arrived and that even *Face/Off* was not the film he had envisaged; however, he insists that no creative constraints were imposed upon him with the making of *Mission: Impossible II* despite the fact it was a sequel (22). As Woo explains, "It is exactly the film I wanted to make" (ibid 22). Woo's style has not been translated directly nor effortlessly into American film and critics have noted a gradual improvement in his Hollywood filmmaking efforts. The problem lies in the fact that Woo's style is in many ways at odds with Hollywood realism and conventions. American action films in general are centered around scenes of violence and action which are marketed to audiences as the biggest, the best, and the most original - very much like Woo's films; however, they lack the "meticulous framework

beneath the busy surface” and the playing off “a surfeit of detail against the broad thematic strokes that bind them together” which characterize Woo’s films (McDonagh 49). Woo’s films also gratify audience desires for action eye candy with their pyrotechnic explosions, fast-paced gun-play, and bloody shoot-outs, yet beneath these scenes of hypermasculinity and violence lie the more profound thematic concerns with male heroism, emotionality, and bonding that escape through the moments of excess and give Woo’s films a complexity and intensity most often lacking in the Hollywood action genre. It is the moments of excess and the readings made possible by those moments that distinguish Woo’s films from even the best of Hollywood’s action films and that draw audiences seeking the pleasures of his male melodrama.

The Pleasure of Woo

Li Cheuk-To suggests the popularity of Woo’s film *A Better Tomorrow* with Chinese audiences may have been the result of the Daya Bay Incident in August of 1986 (174). At the time Chinese authorities were building a nuclear power plant in Daya Bay, and a pressure group in Hong Kong organized a petition-signing campaign; however, the Chinese authorities ignored the wishes of the million people who signed the petition and much resentment was felt by the people (174). At this point the film was released and, as Cheuk-To states, “What better way for a frustrated public to give vent to pent-up feelings?” (174-75). He argues that the film touched sensitive nerves and allowed the audience to identify with its romanticisation of violence - to let off steam rather than offer a sympathetic response to the people (175). Lee Server suggests that Asian audiences enjoy Hong Kong action cinema because of its emotional and visual excesses:

General Asian audiences appreciated the satisfying eye candy Hong Kong was churning out, the chance to laugh, bounce in their seats, cry. The cultists were gripped by the dangerous, rule-breaking filmmaking. Fans fixated on the films’ lurid excesses, dizzying thrill rides, and the happy-go-lucky nihilism of the stars doing their own

stunts.... Chow Yun Fat speaks - admiringly of his director John Woo: "Out of control! Out of his mind!" (23-24)

Woo's films may be popular with Asian audiences because they offer an escape from the social condition present in Hong Kong or China; however, that does not explain their popularity with Western audiences who may have little understanding of, or emotional investment in, the society from which Woo's Hong Kong films offer escape.

Western audiences can find in Woo's films an excess in violence and emotion that is lacking from the American action genre - an emotional thrill invoked by wondrous spectacle and heightened pathos. Woo's films belong to a genre of action film created by the Hong Kong film industry in the 1980s which has been called "heroic bloodshed" (Logan 126), a name which conjures up not only the heroism and emotionalism of the male protagonists but also the visual emphasis on the spectacle of violence and bloodshed. In an interview with Maitland McDonagh, Woo says that he was influenced in making his films by ancient Chinese tales of chivalry and knighthood and explains that he always tries to address the notions of evil, right and wrong, and that sometimes it takes force to overcome wrong. "My films are violent, but they also have an element of romance - not love, but chivalry - and there's always the dream of a better world" (quoted in Chung 43). Woo's films appeal to audiences on both sides of the Pacific because they are not just concerned with action but also with emotionally charged male bonding based on the universal themes of justice, loyalty, and betrayal. As Nathaniel Wice notes, although "Woo's trademark splatter is notable not for its volume of crunching bones but for the garish sense of melodrama that elicits cheers of disbelief and ironic delight worldwide" (24). It is the melodrama - the excess of emotion and violence but also the alternative readings of the text which the melodrama permits - that gives Woo's audiences, especially male audiences, pleasure that they do not find in Hollywood films. As Pam Cook states:

[Melodrama's] potential to move audiences deeply while laying bare the impossible, painful contradictions of social and personal relationships appeals strongly to radical

film critics, and recent feminist interest has focused on the way in which it deals with aspects of women's experience marginalized by other genres. (248)

Woo's films as melodrama offer the same pleasure to a male audience: the address of *male* experience that has been marginalized by other genres. Hollywood action films with their cartoon heroes descended from a longstanding tradition of American tough-guys rarely address real male experience - in terms of the vulnerability and emotions generated by friendships with other men - or, if they do, it is not to the degree that Woo's films do. As melodrama Woo's films not only address male emotionality but they also take it to its vicarious and cathartic limits while simultaneously expressing the ineffable, unrepresentable homoeroticism of male bonding without any associated anxiety for their heterosexual male audience.

* * *

Woo's films are melodramatic because of their excess of emotion, violence, and music which rupture the realism of the films and because of the articulation of the ineffable through those excesses. It is not necessary to choose between the two definitions of the term melodrama - *either* for describing action and violence *or* for describing heightened emotionality - in order to define Woo's films. In early cinema, according to Singer, melodrama was a term used to describe films with action, violence, and sensationalism (95), and in Hollywood's studio era, according to Neale, to describe war films, adventure films, and thrillers ("Melo Talk" 69) - films associated with predominantly male audiences; however, in the 1980s and early 90s critics used the term to describe films of heightened emotionality like the weepie and the family melodrama - films associated with female audiences.⁵ Woo's films seem to demand a re-working of the definition of melodrama because they integrate these disparate interpretations of the form. In Woo's films melodramatic excess surfaces in both the moments of violence and emotionality. The melodrama of Woo's films also demands a re-working of the conception of what melodramatic excess signifies. The contradictions of ideology, which arise out of the signification through excess in Woo's films are not necessarily bourgeois as Nowell-

Smith has stated, nor necessarily concerned with the role of women in patriarchal society as Doane and other feminist critics have stated. Finally, Woo's films require that melodrama be regarded as not just directed at female audiences. Woo's films are concerned with male subjectivity, male-to-male relationships, and the male audience - yet they are also melodramatic texts. Whether or not Woo's audiences would consider his films melodrama or just examples of the action genre at its best, is difficult to determine. What is clear, however, is that Eastern and Western audiences watch Woo's films for pleasure. It is Woo's simultaneous obsession with hyperbolic violence and emotional male bonding that sets his films apart from the average Hollywood action film and that attracts his audience. Perhaps, as the popularity of Woo's Hong Kong films in the States suggests (O'Toole 22), audiences find pleasure in male heroes who can also be as vulnerable as they are heroic.

Notes

1. For example, see Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook, and Christine Gledhill, eds., *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen* (London: BFI Publishing, 1994); Christine Gledhill, ed., *Home is Where the Heart is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: BFI Publishing, 1987); and Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).
2. Except for genres like the serial queen melodrama which Singer discusses.
3. For example, there are varying "readings against the grain" of the film *Now, Voyager* (Rapper 1942): Stanley Cavell and Maria LaPlace argue for a progressive and feminist reading, respectively, in "Ugly Duckling, Funny Butterfly: Bette Davis and *Now, Voyager*," *Critical Inquiry* 16 (Winter 1990): 213-47, and in "Producing and Consuming the Woman's Film: Discursive Struggle in *Now, Voyager*," ed. Christine Gledhill, *Home is Where the Heart is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: BFI Publishing, 1987, 138-66); whereas Mary Ann Doane argues for a less positive feminist reading in *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).
4. In this context I do not mean just the woman's film of the 1940s and 1950s but to all films including recent films that are aimed at female audiences – weepies and chick flicks alike.
5. See Note 1.

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