Children Caught in Crossfire: John Woo and a Global Affective Cinema

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Abstract

This article begins with an observation of the imitations of Asian cinematic aesthetics, especially John Woo’s “aesthetics of violence,” in contemporary Hollywood. The author points out the fallacy of the binary between Hollywood’s attention to realistic details and what Hollywood filmmakers usually perceive as “fantastic/other-worldly” in the “Asian elements.” The author uses John Woo as the primary example of a global affective cinema, which not only features qing (feelings, affects, love) thematically but also relies on qing as the guiding stylistic principle to intensify the emotional and affective power. Drawing on recent scholarships on affect, which has been distinguished from feeling or emotion, he argues that the increasingly popular global affective cinema is different from traditional Hollywood narrative cinema in the sense that it is all about the very effect of intensification, not what is intensified. John Woo’s films strike a chord with the international affective politics that seek to move the “irrational,” “individual,” and “private” affects into the arena of the rational, collective, and public politics.

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An affect is a non-conscious experience of intensity; it is a moment of unformed and unstructured potential. Of the three central terms in this essay—feeling, emotion, and affect—affect is the most abstract because affect cannot be fully realised in language, and because affect is always prior to and/or outside of consciousness (Massumi, *Parables*). Affect is the body’s way of preparing itself for action in a given circumstance by adding a quantitative dimension of intensity to the quality of an experience. The body has a grammar of its own that cannot be fully captured in language.

Eric Shouse, “Feeling, Emotion, Affect”

The 2007 film *Shoot 'Em Up*, directed by Michael Davis and starring Clive Owen, brought the Hollywood obsession with gunplay to a new height. Owen, whose worldwide stardom began with his portrayal of a macho driver in the BMW short film series *The Hire* (2001–2005), shoots his way out of an ambush by legions of gunmen. Cool, calm, and always spot-on in his deadly shooting, Owen saves a baby whose mother was assassinated and exposes a political conspiracy involving gun lobby. With bullets whistling past his ears, he even has time to have sex with a beautiful and voluptuous woman (Monica Bellucci) and brings her to a screaming orgasm in the middle of a gunfight. The resourceful and instinctual Owen makes every fight a stylized visual extravagance of acrobatic dance: in one breath, he can create a sheen of grease on which he slides toward his enemies, shoots down several of them in rapid succession, turns around, sticks his Bugs Bunny carrot through the eye of the sole remaining gunman, and catches the baby in the air. His trench coat gracefully blown up by the stirring air, Owen steps out of the killing ground in impressive slow motion. His superhuman heroics also include jumping out of an airplane, shooting down every parachuting pursuer while free falling, and landing safely with the help of an enemy’s parachute.

The bloody yet highly stylized shooting scenes are reminiscent of the “aesthetics of violence” perfected by John Woo. In fact, Davis has openly acknowledged his indebtedness to Woo, especially to Woo’s cult classics *Hard Boiled* (1992) and *A Better Tomorrow* (1986). In an interview, he said,

The thing that I took away from it [*Hard Boiled*], is I liked the sort of balletic, acrobatic jumping around action. The character flying, he’s not super human, but I think everyone loves seeing somebody in the cinema in the air sort of like a human bullet. I also felt like American action movies