

# Death or Glory

## Two Faces of Violence

Ask the average American what comes to mind when he or she thinks of Asian Cinema, and you will almost certainly hear the word “violent.” Even if this pigeonholing is rather unfair, the movies which come over to the U.S. seem intent on bolstering instead of shatter this notion. From Bruce Lee’s martial arts classics to Chinese *wuxia* epics such as *Hero* to Korean director Park Chan Wook’s *Vengeance* trilogy (including the cult hit *Oldboy*), conflicts in Asian cinema are seen to be resolved exclusively through fists, swords and claw hammers. Yet, this does not mean that all violent films are action-packed thrill rides: brutality can portray different motives and elicit different emotions depending on the context. Two examples of the ultra-violent genre, Takeshi “Beat” Kitano’s *Violent Cop* and John Woo’s *The Killer*, featuring some of the most visceral scenes to appear on film, go a long way in exemplifying how the mood and context surrounding the brutality can alter an audience’s reaction to violence.

Kitano’s role as the director of *Violent Cop* (his first such work) is the result of serendipity. Already slated to star, Kitano took over the directing reins when original director Kinji Fukasaku bowed out. Kitano also had an uncredited role in rewriting the script, removing nearly comedy aspects and transforming

the movie into a macabre tale of revenge and annihilation. In addition to directing Kitano also takes the lead role as Azumi, a “Dirty Harry gone wrong” police officer who is more occupied in abusing his target than arresting him. When his coworker is found dead under suspicious circumstances, Azumi transforms from merely violent to utterly sociopathic, locking into a nihilistic death spiral with his equally sadistic Yakuza parallel, Kirohyro.

Taken at face value, *The Killer* has some transparent similarities to *Violent Cop*. Both feature a police officer pursuing a hitman, and when the case leads to the death of his friend the officer goes out on his own in a chase that ends with the destruction of both hunter and prey. Both films even feature the same “You’re off the case!” line emitted by every movie police chief since the dawn of time. This however is where the similarities end, for unlike the cold-hearted machinations in *Cop*, both the officer and the assassin in *Killer* act out of honor and altruism. In the place of a demented Yakuza is an assassin escaping from one last hit to earn money for his girlfriend’s cornea transplant with a code of honor similar to the cop, who is working from his own sense of justice. Initially denying their similarities, the two come to accept and befriend each other, and in the final scene they join forces against the assassin’s pursuers and the Triad leader who double-crossed the assassin.

Perhaps the most obvious way the films’ respective portrayals of violence differ is in sheer quantity and way they escalate the ferocity. While violence peppers *Cop* throughout the film, the film ratchets it up almost exponentially:

the first two thirds of the film are rather leisurely, opening with kids beating up on an old man and throwing cans off bridges at trawlers. The second explicit death in the film occurs over an hour into the film, the final twenty minutes see the vast majority of the bloodshed. *Killer*, by contrast, is consistently over-the-top: starting off as visceral as *Cop* ended—whose body count *Killer* exceeds in the first action sequence—there is so much violence throughout the film that the escalation feels more gradual.

This leads to the most important divergence in the way the two films portray violence: the emotional impact each film intends to convey through their brutality. *The Killer* is all about glory. The “Gun Fu” confrontations between the officer and the assassin are exquisite ballets of gunplay, with a dash of humor thrown in. When confronted with a group of ready-to-die extras, the protagonists go in guns a-blazing in the akimbo style that has become a Woo trademark. When they fight in tandem, they stand back-to-back as in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*—an homage Woo readily admits to (Woo). Indeed, *The Killer* deserves special attention of how its portrayal of brutality takes on fantasy-like proportions. While *Cop* certainly isn’t tame, *Killer* thrives on overkill. If one bullet is enough to be fatal in Woo’s world, then fifty should be just about right. The guns seem to almost be characters in their own right, and the saltpeter itself takes on near-magical properties: bullets can kill when it suits the plot, cloth alight if so desired, or do next to nothing, as when the assassin is wielding a shotgun with the same arm he was shot in four minutes prior. The out-

come is an energy-filled roller coaster appealing to the viewer's own animal instincts.

*Violent Cop* takes a much slower pacing, interspersing scenes of serenity (and seemingly endless walking) to deliberately slow down the pace of the film. Yet this spacing out of each act serves to multiply the visual impact of each instance. When a small child is caught in the crossfire in one of *The Killers* innumerable action sequences, the audience feels just a small tinge that is quickly lost in the tempest; in contrast, a nameless girl shot in the head during a street fight between Azumi and Kirohyro yields what is perhaps *Cop's* most jarring scene. The focus is not on the violence itself—he even admits that *Cop* was not intended to be as violent as it was (Smedley)—but on the aura of sheer evil emanated by Kirohyro and Azumi.

Viewers therefore are led to two different conclusions about how each film looks at brutality and its reflection on the brutes who partake. *Killer's* protagonists are lauded and exalted, each portrayed as compassionate and loyal to their friends even if they are merciless towards their foes. Both heroes are bound to their codes of honor, and one feels that neither are brought to violence through sheer pleasure of the act, but their hands are forced to their triggers by external circumstances. “Easy to pick up,” the assassin quips while holding a pistol, “but hard to put down.” When the Triad leader steps into the forefront, however, there is no question about who is wearing the black hat: he

is clearly portrayed as a coward who has no problem killing associates or innocents to protect himself or his money.

*Cop* on the other hand has no good guys. As a protagonist, Azumi is no better than the Yakuza he faces: he indulges in endless boozing, smoking, gambling and borrows money from friends with no intention of repaying. Combined with his own chilly malice and disdain for the law when it gets in his way, one gets the impression that his choice of profession between officer and gangster is seen as pure chance rather than any sort of moral code. Indeed, Kirohyro's manical sociopathy provides an almost perfect mirror to Azumi, and if they had swapped places there would have been precious little difference. Rather than heroes or villains, the audience sees a pair of *enfants terribles* who got what they both wanted and deserved; any pity is reserved for those who were killed for being in the way.

The net result, then, is two completely different takes on how violence can affect the audience's response to a film. The same gunshots that instill a viewer's adrenaline rush in *The Killer* serve as depressants in *Violent Cop*, shocking and distressing rather than exhilarating. While neither film will counter accusations that Asian films feature nothing but blood, watching each in succession can certainly impact on viewers that all violence is not created equal.

## **Works Cited**

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