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- 1 The most recent addition to the *New Hong Kong Cinema Series* published by Hong Kong University Press is dedicated to *The Killer* (1989), the film that virtually blasted open the way to Hollywood for famed Hong Kong director John Woo and his favourite star, Chow Yun-fat. In this film Chow is a lone assassin, who after accidentally blinding a singer (Sally Yeh) takes on one last assignment in order to pay for the eye surgery she needs. Things do not go quite as planned, and the killer finds himself on the run from his treacherous employer, as well as from the tough cop (Danny Lee) hot on his trail. The cop and the assassin, however, share the same chivalric code, leading to mutual respect, notorious scenes of emotional male bonding, and eventually a joining of forces against the unscrupulous triad leader.
- 2 The author of this study, Kenneth E. Hall, who previously published a book on Woo's work as a whole,¹ outlines in his Introduction the angles through which he will approach *The Killer*. Hall points at the chivalric tradition in Chinese cinema, the influence of Chang Cheh (Woo's mentor), film noir precedents, and Woo's indebtedness to Jean-Pierre Melville's work (especially his 1967 film, *Le Samourai*). Not only does Hall trace the ancestry of the film, he also looks at its influence on more recent films made in Hong Kong, Korea, France, and the U.S., in this way truly placing the film at the centre of a web of (global) genre development. As will be argued below, this approach is both the book's main strength and its main flaw.
- 3 In Chapter 1, "Apprenticeship for *The Killer*," Woo's early life and career are briefly summarised. Understandably, significant attention is paid to Woo's mentor Chang Cheh, the director who played a pivotal role in shifting Hong Kong cinema's focus from female to male stars. Next, Hall turns to other directors who influenced Woo: Arthur Penn, Sam Peckinpah, Sergio Leone, Martin Scorsese, Jean-Pierre Melville, and Akira Kurosawa are just a few of the filmmakers mentioned. The chapter concludes with a

brief discussion of a set of core ideas that run through all of Woo's mature films: traditional notions of Chinese chivalry and certain "Christian ethical concepts" (p. 14).

- 4 After giving a brief description of the production history and background of *The Killer* in Chapter 2, Hall quickly moves on to a discussion of the film's style and structure in the next chapter, describing it as "a salient example of cross-cultural influence in Hong Kong filmmaking" and an "enlightening exhibit in the study of the fusion of Western and Asian film cultures" (p. 23). A question that naturally arises here is whether distinct "Asian" and "Western" film cultures exist, and in which ways the two would then differ from one another. Indeed, Hall himself hints at a history of interaction between various film industries that would seem to complicate the homogenising binary model he proposes. An interesting feature of this chapter, however, is the link he makes between film noir (as a stylistic feature) and Woo's style in *The Killer*, a link that to my knowledge has not been discussed in such depth before. Hall states that the noir influence on the film was to a large extent channelled through the work of Melville, who based his *Le Samourai* on *This Gun for Hire*, a 1942 noir film directed by Frank Tuttle.
- 5 The Melville connection is explored in greater depth in Chapter 4, and Hall singles out *Le Doulos* (1962), *Le Deuxième Souffle* (1966), *Le Cercle Rouge* (1970), and of course *Le Samourai* as the works most important to a discussion of Melville's influence on John Woo and *The Killer*. Careful not to make Woo look like a simple copycat, Hall also notes the main differences between the two filmmakers: "What Woo did not inherit from Melville is the cynical worldweariness and gray exposition that pervade much of the Frenchman's work" (p. 48). Additionally, for John Woo, "the chivalric code is not 'image' or 'representation' as in Melville" (p. 49). In stylistic terms, Melville influenced Woo most significantly in his construction of action scenes, and in the way these scenes are integrated within the overall design of a film. Hall clarifies this claim by quoting Darragh O'Donoghue, who argues that "Melville (...) privilege[d] action as an end in itself, a purification with metaphysical implications" (p. 51). Donoghue could just as well be talking about a Hong Kong action filmmaker. At the end of the chapter, Hall makes the important point that, despite the recent trend to highlight "transnationalism" in their work, the local political and social concerns in the films of Woo and other Hong Kong directors should not be overlooked: their films contain references to the anxiety surrounding the 1997 handover, as well as a nostalgia for a better, more chivalrous past.
- 6 Moving away from tracing Woo's "ancestry," the following two chapters focus on *The Killer* as an influence on other directors and Woo's own subsequent work. In Chapter 5, Hall argues that *The Killer* has inspired directors in places as varied as the U.S. (Jim Jarmusch, Quentin Tarantino, Robert Rodriguez), Korea (Kang Je-gyu), France (Luc Besson), and Hong Kong (Johnnie To, Patrick Leung). Chapter 6 pays special attention to one of Woo's more recent works in Hollywood, *Windtalkers* (2002), in which Hall discovers several of Woo's "traditional" concerns.
- 7 As can be glimpsed from this review, Hall's book is preoccupied with one (double) question: "W(h)o(o) Influenced W(h)o(o)?" Exhibiting a wide knowledge of film history, Hall certainly does a good job answering the question(s). Maybe a deeper look into Hong Kong's film history might have added an interesting extra layer to the study: the plot of the 1968 film *The Window*, directed by Patrick Lung Kong, resonates strongly with that of *The Killer*. Both films feature a criminal who wrongs a girl (in the earlier

film by accidentally killing the blind girl's father). In both, the criminal then tries to help the girl, who is at first unaware that her benefactor (and eventual lover) is the cause of her problems. And while the criminal also dies at the end of *The Window*, he successfully arranges for his cornea to be given to the girl so that she can see again. The link between the two films becomes even more salient when one realises that Patrick Lung Kong also directed *The Story of a Discharged Prisoner* (1967), on which Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) was based.

- 8 While Hall's mapping of the various linkages between films is certainly fascinating, one gets the sense that *The Killer* is too little discussed on its own terms. Topics such as the film's male bonding and homoeroticism are not dealt with in sufficient depth, and while there is mention of Christian ethical concepts in Woo's films, these concepts are barely explored. Additionally, Hall does not address the melodramatic undercurrents of this action film – undercurrents that can again be traced back to the earlier Lung Kong work. On the other hand, the discussion of Woo's style as film noir is interesting and well informed, and throughout the volume less-known details about the film appear, showing that Hall certainly benefited from direct communication with John Woo and Woo's long-time friend, producer Terrence Chang.

NOTES

1. Hall, Kenneth E., *John Woo: The Films*, Jefferson, McFarland, 1999.