

JOHN WOO'S Bullet in the Head

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Contents

Series Preface	ix
Acknowledgements	xiii
1 The Apocalyptic Moment of <i>Bullet in the Head</i>	1
2 Bullet in the Head	23
3 Aftermath	99
Appendix	109
Notes	113
Credits	127
Filmography	129

1

The Apocalyptic Moment of *Bullet in the Head*

Like many Hong Kong films of the 1980s and 90s, John Woo's *Bullet in the Head* contains grim forebodings then held by the former colony concerning its return to Mainland China in 1997. Despite the break from Maoism following the fall of the Gang of Four and Deng Xiaoping's movement towards capitalist modernization, the brutal events of Tiananmen Square caused great concern for a territory facing many changes in the near future. Even before these disturbing events Hong Kong's imminent return to a motherland with a different dialect and social customs evoked insecurity on the part of a population still remembering the violent events of the Cultural Revolution as well as the Maoist-inspired riots that affected the colony in 1967. Would the People's Liberation Army return to its former role by brutally punishing capitalist transgressors? Could Hong Kong witness its own version of Tiananmen Square if there were any democratic protests against the power of a Beijing-imposed chief executive? Residents would remember how Chairman Mao reversed his dictum of allowing "a

thousand flowers to bloom” during the late 1950s. Johnny Mak’s *The Long Arm of the Law* (1984–1989) “Big Circle” series of gangster films also depicted fear of lawless elements from the Mainland (often former members of the People’s Liberation Army) committing acts of violence after crossing the border separating Guangzhou Province from Hong Kong.

Although Hong Kong cinema was not exclusively obsessed with 1997, fears concerning return to a motherland that many residents escaped from during the 1950s haunted several films. They could encompass an occasional reference to the necessity of learning Mandarin pronunciation as the clock began ticking towards 1997 in films such as Eddie Ma Poon-chiu’s *Wicked City* (1992) as well as a grimmer vision like that contained in Tsui Hark’s *We’re Going to Eat You* (1980). Feelings about the implications of this “homecoming” occur in many Hong Kong films between 1984 and 1997. To ignore this current of thought or deny its contemporary influence does violence towards understanding important levels of meaning existing within these films. Social and historical contexts influence any work, whether artistic or popular. Although doomsday forecasts concerning Hong Kong’s fate in 1997 proved fortunately to be in error, dark forebodings involving the colony’s future were definitely present in many films before that date. Those critics who marginalize them in a different era of global capitalism do great disservice to understanding key implications contained within the material levels of a work. *Bullet in the Head* is a film containing references to 1997. But it also represents a last hurrah to those *yanggang* aspects of heroic bloodshed and male friendship seen in the films of Woo’s mentor Zhang Che.¹ It is a much darker treatment of the Triad themes existing within *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) and *A Better Tomorrow 2* (1987) as well as the other concepts in Hong Kong’s prolific gangster movie genre.

Woo gained important experience in his role as assistant director on two Zhang Che films, *The Boxer from Shantung* (1972)

and *Blood Brothers* (1973) when he transferred to Shaw Brothers after working in Cathay Studios. He has frequently expressed his debt to Zhang Che and co-directed (with Wu Ma) a benefit film for his former mentor, *Just Heroes* (1989) that featured many of Zhang's actors as well as themes associated with him, particularly those important values of loyalty and friendship affected by a changing world. Woo develops many of Zhang Che's visual signatures, such as the use of slow-motion and close-ups, in creative and expressive ways. But he also continues to explore many of the violent *wuxia* themes of his mentor not just in his celebrated *A Better Tomorrow* films but also in his 1978 Golden Harvest film *Last Hurrah for Chivalry* as critics such as John Charles, Ken Hall, Michael Hoover, Lisa Odham Stokes, and Stephen Teo notice.²

The work of Zhang Che represents an apocalyptic current in Hong Kong cinema relevant to its own historical era. Reacting against what he felt were pale representations of males in earlier Hong Kong cinema, Zhang Che depicted his own version of heroic masculinity in films noted for high levels of bloodshed. Zhang's Wang Yu vehicles such as *Tiger Boy* (1965), *The One-Armed Swordsman* (1967), *The Assassin* (1967), *Golden Swallow* (1968), *Return of the One-Armed Swordsman* (1969), and those featuring Ti Lung and David Chiang such as *Vengeance* (1970), *The New One-Armed Swordsman* (1971), *Four Riders* (1971), *The Duel* (1971), *Duel of Fists* (1971), and *Blood Brothers* (1972), presented a world where traditional values of heroism, tradition, and knightly obligation became threatened by a changing era whether set in the distant or recent past. Influenced by a turbulent 1960s era characterized by social change, the Vietnam War, and the radical political experiments of Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution, Zhang Che's "heroic bloodshed" films represented allegorical signifiers of a rapidly changing world heading towards an apocalyptic resolution anticipating the historical and political climax of Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969). The old world of noble heroes personified

by the Confucian values of Kwan Tak-hing's Wong Feihung in the Cantonese cinema of the 1950s and early 1960s rapidly disappeared. Zhang Che's films revealed apocalyptic elements of grim forebodings. So did those later Hong Kong films made under the shadow of a feared return to China. The disastrous events of Tiananmen Square struck terror into the hearts and minds of Hong Kong citizens. At the same time, it must be said that a distinct difference existed between these films of Zhang Che and what John Woo would later attempt in *Bullet in the Head*. Zhang's type of apocalypse appeared to be more conservative in lamenting the loss of a masculinist world having little sympathy for the plight of women and the necessity for the development of a more positive context. Like Woo's film, the apocalypse took on bloody dimensions but a significant difference existed between the works of a director whose world appears to be regressively conservative and those films of his disciple that were more positive and politically nuanced in nature. This difference should alert us to the fact that the idea of apocalypse is more fluid and variable in nature than most conventional definitions suppose.

Most people understand apocalypse as a catastrophic climax for any world order. But an apocalyptic dimension may be symbolic as well as literal, having its own type of distinct cultural discursive connotation far more significant than any particular literal interpretation denoting the end of things. Despite the fact that any eschatological climax often does not occur in the lifetimes of those who expect the worse, this does rule out discarding the entire notion as a key element of meaning. Understanding what an apocalyptic feeling may have meant at a certain time within a definite historical era is always important.

Although the Early Church expected the imminent return of the Messiah within the lives of those he influenced on earth, later interpretations took on symbolic rather than literal dimensions. The chaotic nature of the return always receives emphasis. But each

generation has its own cultural and symbolic interpretations of apocalypse influenced by contemporary historical events. Apocalypse generally refers to a literary corpus dealing with fears and expectations concerning the imminent arrival of the “last days” of human history. Associated with religious texts such as the Book of Revelations and other works contained in *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, the classical mode of this developing genre involves feelings of crisis and chaos associated with the culmination of human history, divine judgment, and the return of a Messianic figure who will herald the last days. Milton scholar Leland Ryken defines the concept as follows:

The word “apocalypse” is derived from the Greek word meaning “to reveal.” Accordingly, it has traditionally been used to describe writing which purports to be a revelation of phenomena which transcend the world of everyday reality. Apocalyptic writing has usually denoted prophetic writing — writing which is predicative of future events. Within this broad framework there are two main types of apocalyptic writing. One is concerned with a transcendental state, outside of time, which will follow history; such writing is eschatological orientated. The other views the apocalyptic state as attainable on earth, and describes a future state that will occur within the order of nature and within the ordinary temporal succession. Apocalypses of this type are frequently social in emphasis, with the reformed social order which is envisioned constituting a warning to contemporary society. Whether the future state is considered as falling within or beyond time, it is viewed as an ideal state — a type of golden age in which there is an ultimate triumph of good over evil.³

Social definitions of the apocalypse vary over historical eras. Ryken defines his version of the apocalypse as a transcendental state “placed either above or prior to ordinary time.”⁴ But the idea of the apocalypse in Hong Kong cinema is material in nature and

highly pessimistic. It does envisage some form of cataclysmic “eschaton” though it has no defined concept of eschatology as opposed to religious interpretations. Warnings of what might happen certainly occur. But they comprise no sense of any idyllic future state nor any envisaged reformed social order but rather a different world which *may* differ radically from its former incarnation and involve elements of crisis, instability, and dislocation.⁵ Apocalyptic literature also shares another common element with its modern counterparts. It is dualistic in nature, involving contrasting interpretations of conflicts between good and evil.⁶ This parallels several features in *Bullet in the Head* involving contrasts between the honorable Frank and Vietnam Buddhist monks with the more evil figures of Paul and Mr. Leong as well as North and South Vietnamese opponents who share a common tendency towards violence transcending their oppositional political ideologies.

Even if the expected event does not occur within the period originally forecast, this does not invalidate investigating the nature of contemporary interpretations delivered within a certain social context. Although the “last days” did not occur within the lifetimes of the twelve disciples and the original members of the Early Church, the concept still remained and became subjected to various reinterpretations as it did in Milton’s era. Ken Simpson notes this situation in terms of the changed perspectives undergone by John Milton in terms of their relationship to the different historical eras within which he worked.

Whereas in 1641 Christ’s return seemed imminent, in the decade after the Restoration the continuing spiritual struggle with Antichrist is emphasized. The turn to inwardness in the last stage of Milton’s apocalyptic thought should not be confused with passivity, quietism, or indifference about the apocalypse, however. Vigorous spiritual preparedness is never absent from Milton’s

early hope for a literal reign of Christ, but here it receives spiritual emphasis in the Restoration wilderness of persecution suffered by nonconformists, republicans, and the hero of *Paradise Regained*.⁷

Although certain critics deny historical and political factors affecting the contemporary Hong Kong films of John Woo and global cultural postmodernist scholars eagerly rejoice over the fact that those dark forebodings concerning 1997 never happened, this still does not invalidate the concept of an apocalyptic mood existing within a certain era of Hong Kong cinema as well as changes affecting its definition following the colony's return to the Mainland.⁸ Precedents exist in previous eras as the above quotation reveals. Furthermore, no reputable Biblical or Milton scholar would reject earlier depictions of the Apocalypse in the Book of Revelations and allied texts on the grounds that since the events they described did not happen, these texts are irrelevant for understanding the mood of a particular era.

Unfortunately, a certain tendency exists in some areas of Hong Kong film scholarship to deny the importance of historical and material factors influencing the production of films made between 1984 and 1997 that involved fears concerning the return to the Mainland and what this might involve. Whether expressed in terms of apocalyptic bloodshed or minor plot motifs in films involving a character's desire to leave Hong Kong to begin a new career before the deadline of 1997 (as does Brigitte Lin's Jane Lin in the 1989 Film Workshop production *Web of Deception*), the historical moment of 1997 does occupy a major role in Hong Kong cinema of that time. Unfortunately, opposing arguments made by certain types of postmodernist scholars eager to deny the historical fears of that era represent a retrogressive opposing tendency. Others also attempt to deny the apocalyptic imminence of that moment by saying that as the dreaded event did not happen it is now therefore

irrelevant in discussing that era of Hong Kong cinema. However, the arguments of local-based scholars such as Yau Ching, Stephen Teo, and Gina Marchetti and those outside such as David Bordwell, Lisa Odham Stokes, and Michael Hoover present an entirely different picture — to say nothing of John Woo some five years following 1997. The idea of apocalypse is diverse but relevant to understanding the context of *Bullet in the Head* as the following quotation shows.

If “Milton’s great poems offer multiple, divergent, and indeed sometimes conflicting visions of the apocalypse and the millennium” — as another Milton scholar has remarked — the same is true both of *Bullet in the Head* and the different depictions of the apocalyptic moment in Hong Kong cinema.⁹ In fact, the apocalypse may not have really gone away but changed its identity by accommodating itself to different circumstances.

Despite the fact that post-1997 Hong Kong is not the Restoration England of Charles II, it does have certain features in common in terms of contradictions and tensions existing within a particular social structure. Not everybody in England was happy with the Restoration of the Stuart Monarchy. Many cultural and political documents exist to reveal that this type of transition was not accepted by everyone, and certainly not by the Puritans! Hong Kong is still a territory exhibiting several tensions on political and artistic levels concerning its uneasy relationship with Mainland Chinese control under figures such as former Chief Executive Tung and his successors. As a specifically Hong Kong entity, the Hong Kong gangster film is currently indirectly dealing with political overtones as seen in the recent work of Johnnie To. He is now moving away from excessive exercises in style towards a more balanced cinema involving relevant material content as seen in *Election* (2005) and *Election 2* (2006).¹⁰ To’s recent films employ a significant socially conscious neo-noir style expressing feelings of insecurity and concern at the changing values of Hong Kong

society nearly a decade after the restoration. Although To's neo-noir style does not reflect a "return of the repressed" politics directly paralleling those turbulent conditions of American postwar society (classical film noirs such as *Cornered* [1945] and *Crossfire* [1947] that appeared before the beginning of the blacklist period in late 1947), it does mediate apprehension concerning changing events following 1997. Despite not reflecting the apocalyptic tones of earlier pre-1997 films such as *Bullet in the Head*, To's two *Election* films depict the insecurity of a changing world in which the old values mean nothing as cynically demonstrated by the figure of Simon Yam Tat-wah's Lok who becomes displaced by Louis Koo's young successor seeking legitimacy. This new godfather instead finds himself trapped by a Mainland bureaucracy that will dominate his soul, the Triad community, and the colony in a far worse manner than anything ever envisaged by pre-1997 representations. The apocalypse arrives. But it is more in the nature of a "whimper" rather than a "bang." However, it is equally deadly as that depicted in John Woo's *Bullet in the Head*.

Made between his departure from Tsui Hark's Film Workshop and his final Golden Princess/Milestone production of *Hard Boiled* (1992), *Bullet in the Head's* credits define it as the most auteur production of the director's career. Woo produced, directed, and co-scripted the work in very much the same manner as those early auteur-related films of Larry Cohen, Samuel Fuller, George Romero, and Tsui Hark himself, where the director occupies the key role in the cinematic process. The credits begin with the logo, "A John Woo Production" signifying a director now asserting his independence from Tsui Hark's producer function on the previous *A Better Tomorrow* films and *The Killer*. Woo worked on the screenplay with Patrick Leung Pak-yin and Janet Chun Siu-chun. *Bullet in the Head* represents one of his most personal works. Despite the type of misleading labels such as "master of violence" also applied to Sam Peckinpah, Woo's work actually transcends

those reductive “blood and bullets” definitions mistakenly applied to his films by many who choose to confine him within generic brand labels and refuse to see other qualities inhabiting his work.

Bullet in the Head is a product of apocalyptic cinema. But at the same time it contains levels of meaning defying conventional definitions. The film combines two seemingly opposite concepts: apocalypse and melodrama, making *Bullet in the Head* more appropriately understood as an “apocalyptic melodrama.” Western audiences usually associate melodrama with female-centered films dealing with domestic contradictions between home and independence according to classical representations associated with Hollywood cinema. But melodrama, especially in its Eastern representations, is more inclusive. It involves not only levels of masculine crisis seen occasionally in classical Hollywood examples such as *The Man from Laramie* (1955) and *Written on the Wind* (1956) but also other meanings extending far beyond domestic confines. Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong cinemas were acquainted with Hollywood melodrama and culturally inflected this genre in highly significant ways. As well as involving the female realm, melodramatic crisis could also encompass masculine issues, especially those having to do with cultural betrayal and challenges to traditional ways of living presented by new social codes. Cantonese and Mandarin branches of Hong Kong cinema contain many examples and they are not exclusively female-centered. Despite the violent nature of Zhang Che’s films, they are often influenced by melodramatic issues as seen in *One Armed Swordsman*, *Return of the One Armed Swordsman*, *The Assassin*, and *Golden Swallow*. In *One Armed Swordsman*, Wang Yu’s title hero becomes symbolically castrated by the daughter of a master who has adopted him. Although he accepts an alternative life by retreating to the country, he returns to defeat his master’s adversary for the last time before retiring finally to his peaceful idyllic life of domesticity. The sequel sees him again reluctantly returning to his

former defender role but now he becomes so disgusted by witnessing the betrayal of heroic values on the part of those he has defended that he retreats from the heroic world for the last time. In *The Assassin*, a contrast exists between the hero's desire for a peaceful union with his beloved and the bloody, heroic deed he has to perform at the climax in the name of duty. In *Golden Swallow*, Wang Yu's Silver Roc engages in masochistic death wish activities evoked by his dark desires for Cheng Pei-pei's title character. At the end of the film, Golden Swallow mourns Silver Roc. But unlike Wang Yu's one-armed swordsman, she cannot accept an alternative and peaceful life that Lo Lieh offers her.

These films operate on excessive levels and deal with conflicts between emotional desire and duty. Zhang Che's later films with Ti Lung and David Chiang further explore the melodramatic conflict between blood brotherhood and loyalty. In *Blood Brothers*, David Chiang's character avenges the betrayal of loyalty by Ti Lung who not only violates their close bonding but seduces the wife of Chen Kwan-tai and arranges his rival's death. This anticipates Paul's betrayal in *Bullet in the Head* although gold represents the motivation here rather than *Blood Brothers's* sexual desire and social advancement. Ti Lung's character betrays friendship to secure his institutional advancement in the Ching dynasty establishment. Paul similarly succeeds Mr. Kwan/King in the Triad community in the final part of *Bullet in the Head* after betraying his other two friends and former blood brothers.

Betrayal is not taken lightly in these films since it violates codes of honor that operate as revered icons of respect in the worlds to which they belong. Those extreme representations involving bloodshed and violence in films that Western viewers often fail to comprehend actually depict an Eastern version of the "melodramatic excess" that appears in a different form within Hollywood melodrama. Many Western critics misunderstand personal dimensions in Woo's films, finding the presence of male

emotional excess and violence foreign to their own experience. Homoerotic and/or sublimated gay overtone discourses dominate certain interpretations. However, *Bullet in the Head* is best understood as an apocalyptic melodrama. It unites opposing realms of the personal and the political within a narrative depicting a particular type of historical crisis casting former personal loyalties and traditional values into doubt. Excessive representations of masculine crisis may lead certain viewers to describe *Bullet in the Head* as “a tearjerker for men.”¹¹ The film certainly contains such emotional qualities but these need to be understood within a certain cultural context. The use of music described by John Charles in his brief analysis actually serves to help viewers to understand more appropriately those important elements of melodramatic excess employed in this film. In earlier VHS copies of *Bullet in the Head*, the music functions as an overpowering element accompanying the descent of the gentle Frank into inhumane violent debasement. It forms a key punctuating aural device depicting an individual trapped into becoming an animal by overwhelming historical forces he has no control over.

Bullet in the Head is a film of personal and historical crisis. As well as being a great achievement of Hong Kong cinema, it is Woo's creative merger of two opposing symbolic modes of interpretation justifying a more appropriate understanding of *Bullet in the Head* as an “apocalyptic melodrama” rather than a spectacular action film. The apocalypse defines some world-threatening cataclysm in which things will never be the same again. Emphasis usually falls upon the historically spectacular definition of how the “last days” will occur. When the three friends arrive in Saigon, they witness events deliberately modeled on the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident. Vietnam functions as a “future perfect” representation of what *might* happen in 1997. It becomes a symbolic apocalypse characterized by bloodshed and violence. Another future “dispersion” symbolically appears in those later scenes showing Ben

as a refugee among the Vietnamese seeking to escape the takeover of their country. The sequence evokes those earlier flights of Chinese citizens fleeing Mainland China after the victory of Mao's forces in 1949 as well as those escaping the violence of the Cultural Revolution a generation later.

By contrast, melodrama focuses upon personal dilemmas whether involving males or females. As Patrick Leung points out, the original Cantonese title *Dip huet gaai tau* (Mandarin, *Die xie jie tou*) literally translated as "Bloodshed on the streets," refers to the streets in terms of being the area of the lower classes during the late 1960s.¹² The film begins in the mean streets of the impoverished areas of Hong Kong and ends on the Ching Yu dock area of the colony. Since the first part of the film focuses upon the life of three lower-class male characters, an element that John Woo has described as "biographical," it is not surprising that the film contains melodramatic associations very much in the tradition of Cantonese social cinema such as Lung Gong's *Story of a Discharged Prisoner* (1967) and *Teddy Girls* (1969).¹³ The wedding of Ben and Jane is a community event in the first part of the film since it is set in a long-vanished environment where poor people lived in council estates with courtyards facing each other and had daily contact unlike those contemporary isolated high-rise small apartments seen in films such as *Underground Banker* (1993). Although the 1950s Cantonese socially conscious world of *The House of 72 Tenants* (last filmed by Shaw Brothers in 1973) has now virtually disappeared, the proximity of people living close to each other and discovering their problems still exists as depicted in the wedding night scene of Ben seeing Frank being thrown out by his parents. Ben then decides to avenge Frank as a matter of honor. Contrast between the codes of friendship and loyalty shared between Ben and Frank and the more inhumane mercenary values influencing Paul form key melodramatic components in a film where personal issues are always paramount.

Bullet in the Head was designed to be entirely distinctive from Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* Film Workshop productions as well as *Hard Boiled*, his last Hong Kong film made before leaving for America. After the success of *A Better Tomorrow*, Tsui Hark prevailed upon Woo to make a sequel featuring Cinema City partner Dean Shek. Although he did not want to repeat himself and become trapped in a particular genre, Woo reluctantly agreed to direct this film. He shelved the idea of doing a prequel to *A Better Tomorrow* set in 1970s Vietnam that would show the beginnings of the relationship between Mark and Ho (Ti Lung) established in the earlier film. Following disagreements over the editing of *A Better Tomorrow 2* and Tsui Hark's lack of enthusiasm for *The Killer* project, Woo decided to approach Golden Princess Amusements Company with the support of Chow Yun-fat to make the film that would eventually lead to international recognition and Hollywood contracts for both director and star. Woo later discovered that Tsui Hark intended to make his own version of the prequel titled *A Better Tomorrow 3* that was released in 1989. Since Chow Yun-fat's character died at the end of *A Better Tomorrow*, the original prequel idea appeared to be a good way of bringing the star back to life. Tsui Hark's decision to do his own version of a project he had originally spurned motivated Woo to leave the Film Workshop and become his own producer.¹⁴ Since Woo could not now use Chow Yun-fat in the role he originally envisaged for him as he was now a major star, he decided to cast three young actors then making their names in Hong Kong cinema: Tony Leung Chiu-wai, Jacky Cheung Hok-yau, and Waise Lee (Lei Chi-hung) (Still 1). All were relative "unknowns" at the time and were not major names in the Hong Kong film industry.

Like many Hong Kong actors, Tony Leung began in television under the Hong Kong Television Broadcasts Limited Training Program. He became known for co-hosting a program with Stephen Chow Sing-chi before moving into films and appearing with Chow



Still 1 Tony Leung, Jacky Cheung, and Waise Lee.

Yun-fat in *The Lunatics* (1986), Stanley Kwan's *Love into Waste* (1986), and Hou Hsiao-hsien's Taiwanese production of *City of Sadness* (1989). Despite this promising start, he had not yet become the major star that he would a decade later. By casting him in both *Bullet in the Head* and *Hard Boiled* (1992), John Woo gave this talented actor further recognition and stimulated his future film career in the same way as he had done with Chow Yun-fat. Jacky Cheung began his career as a singer but, like many working in the highly competitive Hong Kong entertainment industry, recognized the importance of diversifying his talents. After gaining a recording contract by winning the 1985 All Hong Kong Singing Contest over ten thousand male competitors, he began learning acting skills and had already received the Hong Kong Film Award for Best Supporting Actor for his role in Wong Kar-wai's *As Tears Go By* (1988). Patrick Leung and John Woo had seen his performance and decided to cast him in the role of Frank which he still regards as his best acting of all his films.¹⁵ By contrast, Waise Lee did not achieve the later star status of his fellow performers. But this is not to deny his essential role in the film. His Paul is an important complement to the characters played by Tony Leung and Jackie Cheung. After beginning his career as

a model, his appearance in a television commercial attracted the attention of Tsui Hark (in very much the same way as “Tippi” Hedren came to Alfred Hitchcock’s notice) who cast him as the treacherous Shing in *A Better Tomorrow*. Lee’s role anticipated his more nuanced performance in *Bullet in the Head* since Woo and Patrick Leung needed the presence of “a calculating traitor who betrays his friends.”¹⁶ When making the film, Lee discovered that John Woo did not perform the same type of close mentoring that he had done with him on *A Better Tomorrow*. Instead, by wanting to “create a sad and angry character,” the director deliberately isolated Lee from the other actors, preferring to associate with Lee’s fellow co-stars, and indulging in behavior reminiscent of John Ford on his worst days on a film set. However, these psychological tactics worked and the actor not only delivered one of the best performances of his career but also individually modeled his climactic manic acting in the closing scenes on Al Pacino’s performance in Brian DePalma’s *Scarface* (1983). Although Bey Logan expresses frequent criticism of Waise Lee’s acting in this film, I disagree with his arguments.¹⁷ Rather than delivering an uncontrolled performance, the actor actually delivers his own version of male hysteria very similar to Al Pacino’s role in *Scarface*. His character is an insecure male wishing to overcompensate for his vulnerable personality by acquiring wealth at the cost of betraying his friends. His acting is very much in the tradition of male melodramatic depiction and I will comment further on this later. Lee had already delivered competent performances in 1988 in Kirk Wong’s Cinema City production *Gunmen* and Andrew Kam and Johnnie To’s *The Big Heat* and would continue to do so after *Bullet in the Head*. He would later play a Triad version of Robert De Niro’s Al Capone from Brian De Palma’s *The Untouchables* (1987) in David Lam Tak-luk’s *First Shot* (1993). Despite his failure to achieve stardom, he is one of Hong Kong cinema’s most accomplished character actors.

Other supporting roles deserve attention. Although *Bullet in the Head* is Simon Yam Tat-wah's only role for John Woo to date, his performance as Eurasian assassin Luke is one of the best in his career. Realizing that moving too far away from *A Better Tomorrow's* romantic overtones into the more "realistic" dimensions of *Bullet in the Head* might alienate audiences, Patrick Leong and Woo decided to cast Yam as a more attractive debonair figure to counterpoint the more "mean streets" characters of the young leading actors. Although Chow Yun-fat's Mark Gor from *A Better Tomorrow* and his Jean-Pierre Melville–influenced "Jeff" of *The Killer* (1989) are missing from *Bullet in the Head*, Yam's accomplished acting style manages both to evoke the aura of this absent figure as well as inflect the role with his own type of distinctive interpretation. Luke's opening appearance belongs amongst the most romantic entries in cinema. With his white suit he evokes the phantom presence of Jeff in *The Killer* as well as expressing Woo's debt to Alain Delon's cool assassin in *Le Samourai* (1967). The musical leitmotif *Autumn Leaves*, derived from the French version co-written by Jacques Prevert for his 1945 film *Les Portes de la nuit*, announces his presence. Like Jeff, Luke performs a sacrificial act that will redeem his soul from corruption. As Bey Logan points out in his DVD audio-commentary, Luke enters the film physically perfect but inwardly scarred and exits it physically scarred but inwardly purified. Despite his love for Sally (Yolinda Yan Sau-sing), Luke is unable to save her. But, unlike Jeff in *The Killer* who dies at the climax, Luke will live on having gained spiritual salvation by saving Frank and Ben from the Viet Cong prison camp. He becomes a true friend to two Hong Kong street kids who embody values he has long forgotten but which will live on in a disabled body no longer permitting him to continue in his former profession as a hired killer.

Common critical opinion views Woo as a director who cannot satisfactorily depict female performances in his Hong Kong films.

Compared to the four leading characters of *Bullet in the Head*, the roles of Sally and Jane (Fennie Yuen Kit-ying) appear lacking. However, no director is perfect and Woo here exhibits one of his recognizable blind spots. Like Zhang Che, he is more at home depicting the world of men rather than having any type of feminist sensitivity. The female roles are minor. But, nonetheless, they are still important within the structure of *Bullet in the Head*. Now retired from screen, Yolinda Yan was a well-known singer who had earlier appeared in a film by Stanley Kwan titled *The Lying Woman* according to Patrick Leong in a DVD interview. Known for addressing constraining factors governing female experience, Kwan's use of Yolinda Yan in this film probably influenced Woo's casting. Sally undergoes a far worse fate than any of Kwan's heroines. Like Sally Yeh in *The Killer*, she represents a victimized female, symbolizing a lost hope for a return to the safe world of Hong Kong that *Bullet in the Head* reveals as being illusory. None of the three heroes ever returns in the same way. Sally's death represents the final extinction of this romantic hope. Like the wildflower in her song, she is a "dandelion" who will be blown wherever the wind carries her and her fragile persona reflects this. Although she differs from Fennie Yuen, the two women share a basic physical resemblance. Parallels between them occur in the Saigon demonstration scene where her stumbling duplicates the similar movement of Jane during the 1967 Maoist riots outside the Hong Kong factory where she works. Unlike Yolinda Yan, Fennie Yuen's career continued until 2003. Prior to that she had appeared in some key productions such as Sammo Hung Kam-po's accomplished action-comedy-drama *Pedicab Driver* (1986), Ringo Lam's *School on Fire* (1988), Lau Kar-leung's final installment of the *Aces Go Places* series — *Aces Go Places V: The Terracotta Hit* (1989), and Tsui Hark's troubled Film Workshop production *Swordsman* (1990) which also featured a score by *Bullet in the Head* composers James Wong Jin and Romeo Diaz. As Jane, Fennie

Yuen mostly displays those token submissive qualities of a heroine from a Zhang Che film where emphasis lies on heroes rather than heroines. Hers is a thankless role. But Jane does display resilience by questioning Ben's illusions that their separation will be temporary before he departs for Saigon. In the midst of the Maoist demonstration and imminent bomb explosion, she punctuates his earlier fantasy of flying away somewhere free from historical and political violence. "The whole world is in turmoil. Who knows what tomorrow will bring?" Jane is more realistic about the future than her newly wed husband.

Last, but not least, credit should go to the menacing performance of Lam Chung as Chinese-Vietnamese Triad boss Mr. Leong. As Larry Cohen once told me, any good film needs a great villain and Lam Chung superbly fills this category. He is very underrated in Hong Kong cinema and his achievements deserve special mention. This well-known (to Hong Kong audiences) prolific actor-director had appeared in Tony Au Ding-ping's reincarnation feature *Dream Lovers* (1986) as a reformed thief now working as a museum curator, Ronny Yu Yan-tai's *Legacy of Rage* (1986), *Angel* (1987), Sun Chung's overwrought melodrama *Lady in Black* (1987), *A Better Tomorrow 2* (1987), Taylor Wong Tai-loi and Johnny Mak's production *Rich and Famous* (1987), Tony Leung Si-hung's sequel *Tragic Hero* (1987) playing a Triad in both films, Jeff Lau Chun-wai's female *Police Academy* spin-off *Operation Pink Squad* (1988), David Lam's *Call Girl* (1988), Lowell Lo Kwung-ting's female prison drama *The First Time Is the Last Time* (1989), Wong Chung's comedy *Run Don't Walk* (1989), Yuen Bun's *A Moment of Romance* (1990), and Na Nai-choi's *Erotic Ghost Story* (1990). A year after *Bullet in the Head* Lam Chung would portray a Japanese mad scientist sexual sadist in Jaimie Luk Kim-ming's cult classic *Robotrix* (1991).

John Woo probably cast him as Mr. Leong due to his gangster role in *A Better Tomorrow 2* and as Chow Yun-fat's first victim in

the opening scenes of *The Killer*. But Lam Chung could also portray other characters such as policemen in Clifton Ko Chi-sum's 1986 drama *Devoted to You* (which also starred Jackie Cheung), Che-Kirk Wong's remake of *Angels with Dirty Faces* now set in 1955 Hong Kong — *True Colours* (1986) with Ti Lung in the James Cagney role, Tony Au's 1935 period prostitution drama *Profiles of Pleasure* (1988), Yuen Cheung-yan's 1989 drama *Live Hard* (starring Simon Yam), Alfred Cheung Kin-ting's pre-Handover satire *Her Fatal Ways* (1990), Norman Law-man's *Family Honor* (1990), and even a film director in Anthony Chan-yau's romantic comedy drama *A Fishy Story* (1989)! Since many Hong Kong films such as Kirk Wong's *Organized Crime and Triad Bureau* (1994) and the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy deal with criminal activities in the police force, it is not surprising that Lam Chung often portrays characters on both sides of the law. As Bey Logan remarks on the audio-commentary of the 2004 *Hong Kong Legends* DVD release of *Bullet in the Head*, Lam Chung's character represents a composite version based on actual characters in the Hong Kong film industry whether gangster and/or businessmen. Any producer or director knows that appropriate casting is essential to any film's success especially involving a good villain. Lam Chung admirably fills that category in his role as Mr. Leong. Furthermore, whether John Woo knew this or not, the actor had also appeared in Zhang Che's *One Armed Swordsman*. Another coincidental Zhang Che association occurred in the casting of Pau Hei-ching as Ben's mother. Still working today, she began her career during the 1950s and 60s working at Zhang Che's old studio Cheung Sing/Great Wall known for its Cantonese social melodramas in the various capacities of actress, assistant, and script-girl. Her brief appearances playing Ben's more sympathetic mother, juxtaposed with Paul's bitter father, would add a particular resonance to the earlier scenes in *Bullet in the Head* that showed the last days of this rapidly vanishing Hong Kong working-class community.

This very ambitious project demanded a large budget. Since he was still under contract with the Film Workshop, Terence Chang could not work as producer with Woo until *Hard Boiled*.¹⁸ The film's cost rose from HKD 8 million to 28 million, a huge sum at that time. As opposed to the normal two-to-three-month shooting schedule, *Bullet in the Head* took five months to make with location scenes in Thailand substituting for Vietnam. The interiors were shot in Hong Kong studios with special location scenes set in rapidly disappearing council home tenement buildings as well as those remaining World War II air-raid shelters. John Woo's most ambitious and creative project was about to begin: an epic period war film that deliberately differed from the director's two previously successful breakthrough gangster films. As Bey Logan states, "*Bullet in the Head* aimed at a David Lean epic quality without a David Lean budget." John Woo began to fulfill a dream that had earlier influenced his desire to make films by finally directing his own version of a David Lean epic that would be much darker in tone. However, like all his other cinematic influences whether Western (Melville, Peckinpah, Scorsese) or East Asian (Zhang Che, Kurosawa), he would make *Bullet in the Head* his own personal project and unique creation as "A John Woo Production."¹⁹

Notes

Acknowledgements

- 1 Ken Loach, "Director's Note." *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*. Cork, Ireland: Galley Head Press, 2006, 9.

Chapter 1 The Apocalyptic Moment of *Bullet in the Head*

- 1 See *Chang Che: A Memoir*. Ed. Wong Ain-ling. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2004.
- 2 John Charles, *Hong Kong Filmography 1977–1997*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2000, 178; Stephen Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions*. London: BFI Publishing, 1997, 175; Lisa Odham Stokes and Michael Hoover, *City on Fire: Hong Kong Cinema*. London: Verso, 1999, 43–44; Kenneth E. Hall, *John Woo: The Films*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 1999, 82, 66–94. Lisa Odham Stokes, *Historical Dictionary of Hong Kong Cinema*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2007, 223–24. Hall's book is exemplary for its detailed examination of Woo's stylistic signatures.

- 3 Leland Ryken, *The Apocalyptic Vision in Paradise Lost*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1970, 2. See also John T. Shawcross, "Confusion: The Apocalypse, the Millennium." *Milton and the Ends of Time*. Ed. Juliet Cummins. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 106. I wish to thank Dr. Ryan Netzley for introducing me to this material.
- 4 Ryken, 3.
- 5 For various definitions of twentieth-century crisis cinema and the relationship to Hong Kong cinema see the various essays contained in *Crisis Cinema: The Apocalyptic Idea in Postmodern Narrative Film*. Ed. Christopher Sharrett. Washington, D.C.: Maisonneuve Press, 1993; Tony Williams, "Space, Place and Spectacle: The Crisis Cinema of John Woo." *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity*. Eds. Poshek Fu and David Desser. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 137–57.
- 6 See Walter Schmithals, *The Apocalyptic Movement: Introduction and Interpretation*. Trans. John E. Steely. Nashville: University of Tennessee Press, 1975, 22–23; Juliet Cummins, "Matter and Apocalyptic Transformations in *Paradise Lost*." *Milton and the Ends of Time*, 169.
- 7 Ken Simpson, "The Apocalypse in *Paradise Regained*." *Milton and the Ends of Time*, 204.
- 8 See the postmodernist, a-historical, and non-materialistic reading of *A Better Tomorrow* in Karen Fang, *A Better Tomorrow*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004. For other disturbing postmodernist approaches attempting to deny the implications of 1997, see Michael Walsh's review of *The Cinema of Hong Kong*. <http://www.screeningthepast.com> 15 (2003) and Karen Fang, "The Poverty of Sociological Studies of Hong Kong: Stokes and Hoover's *City on Fire*." <http://film-philosophy.com/vol17-2003/n36fang.com>. For a response see Lisa Odham Stokes and Michael Hoover, "Comments on Karen Fang's Review of *City on Fire*: Hong Kong Cinema." <http://film-philosophy.com/vol17-2003/n37stokeshoover.com>. Abundant materialexistsconcerningcolonyfearsover1997inthelightofTiananmen Square. For Woo's own position at the time see Berenice Reynaud, "Woo in Interview." Translated by Terence Chang, *Sight and Sound*

3.5 (1993): 25. “I also wanted to use Vietnam as a mirror for what’s going to happen in Hong Kong in 1997.” This statement explicitly contradicts Woo’s statement in the email interview Fang conducted on January 2003. See Fang, 119–20. Unlike Fang, Reynaud conducted a personal interview with John Woo. For another insightful recognition of the “1997” syndrome in relation to contemporary Hong Kong films and *Bullet in the Head* see David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000, 39–40, 109–10. Yau Ching remarks that very few Hong Kong films seek to confront political issues and even when the colony was full of anxiety concerning the implications of the 1984 Sino-British Declaration, several Hong Kong films such as *Hong Kong 1941* (1984), *Love in a Fallen City* (1984), *The Boat People* (1982), *Shanghai Blues* (1984), and *Homecoming* (1984) remained at the level of allegory by employing different times and places to depict the contemporary situation of Hong Kong by means of indirect allegory. See Yau Ching, *Filming Margins, Tang Shu Shuen: A Forgotten Hong Kong Woman Director*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004, 95. According to Gina Marchetti, “If anything, after 1997, allusions to the relationship between Hong Kong and the PRC in the cinema have become even more pronounced.” See her *Andrew Lau and Alan Mak’s Infernal Affairs: The Trilogy*. Hong Kong University Press, 2007, 66. Marchetti makes further illuminating comments on Hong Kong cinema’s mode of allegorical configuration on 68, 73, and 100. Such ideas are very relevant to the appropriate understanding of *Bullet in the Head*. For the importance of understanding contemporary cultural and historical factors concerning interpretation see also David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989, 265, 267; Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992.

- 9 David Loewenstein, “Afterword: ‘The Time Is Come’.” *Milton and the Ends of Time*, 241.
- 10 Martha P. Nochimson and Robert Cashill, “One Country: Two Visions: An Interview with Johnnie To.” *Cineaste* 22.2 (2007): 36–39. See also

Stephen Teo, *Director in Action: The Films of Johnnie To*. London: British Film Institute, 2007.

- 11 This term is used by John Charles (40) but he does not employ it negatively. He uses it rather to describe a particular type of audience reaction that may not do justice to the film. As he continues, his use of the term becomes explicable in terms of the following sentence. "The film offers the same male bonding and high emotions that characterize Woo's earlier gangster pictures and unfolds amidst a surfeit of bloody but stylish violence. However, the superb melancholy score by James Wong and Romeo Diaz manipulates one's emotions to a greater degree, and the juxtaposition of physical cruelty, mental anguish, and human debasement in the face of war gives this film a more powerful impact." For further observations on Woo's serious depiction of traumatic violence in the film, especially those scenes depicting Frank's debasement by violence in the Viet Cong camp, see James Steintrager, "Bullet in the Head: Trauma, Identity and Violent Spectacle." *Chinese Films in Focus: 25 New Takes*. Ed. Chris Berry. London: British Film Institute, 2003, 23–30. Hall, 137, also describes the film as "arguably a melodrama" and notes parallels to *Coriolanus*. *Titus Andronicus* could also be mentioned because of *Bullet in the Head*'s undeniably Gothic elements. The accusing silent nature of Frank's skull in the boardroom scene parallels Lavinia's mute presence when her father takes revenge on her violators. All these references demonstrate how multifaceted Woo's film is. It cannot really be defined by any one particular genre or influence.
- 12 See the "Tempting Fate" interview with Patrick Leung on the two-disc U.K. *Hong Kong Legends* DVD reissue of 2004.
- 13 "Life through a Lens," interview with John Woo. *Hong Kong Legends* DVD feature.
- 14 See Hall, 136. Darryl Pestilence, "John Woo (Ng Yu Sam)." <http://victorian.fortunecity.com/durer/661/johnwoo>
- 15 "Tempting Fate"; "Baptism of Fire: An Exclusive Interview with Jackie Cheung," Special Feature. *Hong Kong Legends*.
- 16 Stokes, 256; "Tempting Fate."
- 17 "Paradise Lost: An Interview with Waise Lee," "Reflections on *Bullet in the Head*." Special Features. *Hong Kong Legends*. Bey Logan audio-commentary.

- 18 Hall, 136.
- 19 Bey Logan audio-commentary; “Life through a Lens.”

Chapter 2 Bullet in the Head

- 1 The actual Chinese names of the characters played by Tony Leung, Jackie Cheung, and Waise Lee are Ah-Bee, Ah-Fai, and Sai Wing respectively. Although the *Hong Kong Legends* DVD version retains these names, for the purpose of convenience I intend to use the Westernized versions that are familiar from most copies of the film currently in circulation today.
- 2 John Charles, *Hong Kong Filmography 1977–1997*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2000, 40.
- 3 The U.S. theatrical version of the film eliminated the graphic images of the three young stars oblivious of the fact that Woo wished to highlight the premature star status of these young actors. For the various narrative transformations “I’m a Believer” undergoes throughout the film see Kenneth E. Hall, *John Woo: The Films*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 1999, 146. His examination of *Bullet in the Head* is exemplary both in terms of detail and nuance. Hall, 135–47.
- 4 See Richard Dyer, “Entertainment and Utopia.” *Movie 24* (1977): 36–43.
- 5 The photo between Kennedy and Elvis shows a young Chinese with his hair styled in the same manner as Elvis. He is probably one of the many 1960s Cantonese pop stars who imitated American music.
- 6 I use this term deliberately to evoke the common ideological understanding of Hollywood as the provider of entertainment. See Richard Maltby, *Harmless Entertainment: Hollywood and the Ideology of Consensus*. Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1983.
- 7 Ringo is given the Chinese name of “Brother Keung” in the *Hong Kong Legends* DVD. As Bey Logan remarks on his audio-commentary, it is uncertain whether the English translation refers to Ringo Lam or Ringo Starr of the Beatles.
- 8 For Woo’s knowledge of both Hawks and *Rio Bravo* see Hall, 7, 11, 39, 65, 158.

- 9 Woo's cameo role as a policeman may be the result of stepping in at the last moment for an actor who did not appear on the set. But it also represents the director's brief Hong Kong cinematic versions of a Hitchcock cameo where the author often appears during significant moments in his films. Despite the different images of the Hong Kong police force in cinema and reality, Woo presents himself firmly on the side of law and order as he does in his Taiwan police chief role in *A Better Tomorrow*. There he sincerely hopes for the redemption of Ti Lung's character throughout the film and approves the noble gesture he makes in the final scene by making his brother accept the validity of the law. By contrast, in Lung Gong's *Story of a Discharged Prisoner* (1967), Woo's character is a detective (played by the director himself) who constantly hounds Patrick Tse Yin's title character into becoming a police informant. Although this film influenced Woo in many ways, the differences are also significant. Unlike Lung Gong's other cameo appearance in *Teddy Girls* (1969), where he plays the negative role of Josephine Siao's stepfather, Woo always identifies himself with positive elements as seen in own cameo roles as in *Hand of Death* (1976) and *Hard Boiled* (1992) where Woo's barman character articulates moral values very close to the director. In his *Bullet in the Head* cameo, Woo probably wishes to state his disapproval of Ben's killing of Ringo. The director also made a rare acting appearance in Tony Leung Siu-hung's *Rebel from China* (1990) where he played a morally conscientious role of older brother to the main character.
- 10 See Stephen Heath, "Film and System: Terms of Analysis, Part I." *Screen* 16.1 (1975): 7-77.
- 11 The 1967 riots made an indelible impression on Hong Kong society and references to that incident occur in films as diverse as Anthony Chan Yau's *A Fishy Story* (1989), Evans Chan Yiu-shing's *Adeus Macao* (1999), and Wong Kar-wai's *2046* (2004). *A Fishy Story* opens with a montage sequence of historical stills, one of which shows a bomb disposal officer in full gear that obviously inspired the sequence in Woo's film. According to George Shen, "1967 saw many homemade grenades going off in Hong Kong and, for a time, the lefties ran wide (*sic*) in the city." He mentions that the left-wing film company Eng

- Wah sent a camera crew to capture riot scenes intended to be used as background material for a Lung Kong film, *The Plague*, whose title was deliberately based on Albert Camus's play. During its production in 1968, left-wing activists accused the director of "inciting" the public with an *apocalyptic* vision of Hong Kong" (italics, mine). The film remained in limbo for two years until the distribution company re-edited the footage and removed some "blasting scenes." It was finally released in 1970 under the new title *Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*. See George Shen, "Filmdom Anecdotes." *Monographs of Hong Kong Veterans (2): An Age of Idealism: Great Wall and Feng Huang Days*. Ed. Wong Ain-ling. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2001, 310. The Hong Kong Film Archive is performing a valuable service by filling in the gaps of Hong Kong cinema with these publications. *Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* is difficult to see and more work needs to be done on Lung Kung's influence on John Woo. Unfortunately, the film is not mentioned in the most recent oral history publication by the Hong Kong Film Archive but, hopefully, this may be rectified in the future. See "Oral History: Patrick Lung Kong." *The Glorious Modernity of Kong Ngee*. Ed. Wong Ain-ling. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2006, 198–209. This film represented a type of social cinema generally regarded as taboo in the industry and Tsui Hark's scandalous *Dangerous Encounter: First Kind* (1980) may represent a later example of this trend. For a personal perspective concerning the significance of these riots see also Yau Ching, *Filming Margins, Tang Shu Shuen: A Forgotten Hong Kong Woman Director*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004, 113–14.
- 12 Lisa Odham Stokes, *Historical Dictionary of Hong Kong Cinema*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2007, 422.
 - 13 See *Vietnam War Films. Over 600 Feature, Made-for-TV, Pilot and Short Movies, 1939-1992, From The United States, Vietnam, France, Belgium, Australia, Hong Kong, South Africa, Great Britain and Other Countries*. Ed. Jean-Jacques Malo and Tony Williams. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, Ltd., 1994. *Jump into Hell* was not available for viewing during the period this book was compiled.
 - 14 "Tempting Fate," Special Feature. *Hong Kong Legends* DVD edition. According to James H., Chow Yun-fat was originally scheduled to play

- Luke since he was impressed by the screenplay. But when Woo informed him of the character's secondary (but essential) role in the narrative, he did not want it to affect his contemporary star status he had sought since leaving television. See James H., "Bullet in the Head." <http://www.cityonfire.com/hkfilms/ab/bulletinthehead.html>.
- 15 Coincidentally enough according to Lisa Stokes (2007: 215), Philip Kwok's first screen appearance was in Zhang Che's *Marco Polo*.
 - 16 These scenes (and others) may be found in the Fortune Star/Joy Films two-disc DVD edition of *Bullet in the Head* (2004). Were they also removed because of distributor fears about Woo "inciting the public with an *apocalyptic* vision of Hong Kong" as Lung Kong supposedly did in 1968? According to a June 17, 2002 interview with John Woo, the edited footage is now lost permanently since the studio laboratory threw them away, making any definitive "director's cut" impossible. See Jeffrey M. Anderson, Interview with John Woo: "Shooting the Breeze." <http://www.combustiblecelluloid.com/interviews/johnwoo.shtml>
 - 17 Kevin Heffernan, "Do You Measure Your Friendship in Gold? The Genre Cinema of John Woo." A paper presented at the Hong Kong Cinema: Critical Perspectives Panel at the February 13, 1993 Meeting of the Society for Cinema Studies. I again wish to express my thanks to Kevin for allowing me access to this paper and a longer version written on May 6, 1992.
 - 18 The urine sequence was probably removed for reasons of censorship and good taste but its excision leaves a glaring gap in other edited versions where Leong's hair is inexplicably wet before he is dragged away. According to Bey Logan's audio-commentary, it is based on an actual incident that happened to Ringo Lam who then told it to John Woo and Chow Yun-fat, the latter using it as a reference in *A Better Tomorrow*.
 - 19 As Hall, 217, notes, "Paul's character owes more than a little to Fred C. Dobbs, Bogart's gold-corrupted prospector in *The Treasure of Sierra Madre* (John Huston, 1948)." Bey Logan also sees a reference to the final scene of Huston's *The Man Who Would Be King* (1975) in the later boardroom confrontation involving a skull but I would suggest that Sam Peckinpah's *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* (1974) is a more likely source.

- 20 For a Marxist-psychoanalytic reading of both *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* in social and economic terms see Franco Moretti, "Dialectic of Fear." *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*. Trans. Susan Fischer, David Forgacs, and David Miller. London: Verso, 1983, 83–108.
- 21 For Woo's debt to Peckinpah and how he reworks this particular influence see Hall, 3–7, 11, 66, and especially, 209, n.6, where he cites two important film industry authorities who recognize the differences between both directors.
- 22 Although critics such as Stephen Prince see Woo as one of the people responsible for the cult of excessive violence in contemporary Hollywood cinema, I believe this view is mistaken and that a detailed analysis of the director's films contradicts it. This is the reason for my chosen methodology of close textual analysis since close attention to detail is very important towards understanding the real significance of Woo's films. See Stephen Prince, *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies*. Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1998, 168, 230, 231.
- 23 The current theatrical, VHS, and DVD versions of the film present this passage in silence while the earlier VHS Mandarin dialogue version had Sally's "Windflowers" song poignantly accompanying the quiet musings on the part of the three men who mourn her loss. This is one of the instances when the original sound mixture should have been retained since it forms an appropriate Eisenstein vertical montage complement to the scenes where sound, music, and image appropriately combine to depict a sad emotional moment in the film.
- 24 See James Steintrager, "Bullet in the Head: Trauma, Identity and Violent Spectacle." *Chinese Films in Focus: 25 New Takes*. Ed. Chris Berry. London: British Film Institute, 2003, 26–28. Jackie Cheung also regards his performance in *Bullet in the Head* as his best role to date. See "Baptism of Fire: An Exclusive Interview with Jackie Cheung," Special Features. *Hong Kong Legends* two-disc edition of *Bullet in the Head*.
- 25 For Kubrick's influence on Woo see Hall, 11, 43–44, 63, 114–15, 118–19, 123, 132–39.

- 26 According to Bey Logan's audio-commentary, the presence of this child may evoke another well-known Vietnam War image, namely the photograph of a naked Vietnamese girl fleeing in terror along a road after being napalmed by American bombers.
- 27 See Stephen Teo, *A Touch of Zen*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007, 22–25, for the significance of this imagery. By contrast, I believe Woo stresses the liberating powers of the day in this sequence rather than the nightly realm of the spider since the scenes showing Ben's slow recuperation occur during daylight.
- 28 I am thinking primarily of the key sequence in *Notorious* and the safe robbery scene in *Marnie*. Many other examples could be supplied.
- 29 Charles, 40. By contrast, Logan believes that the film should have ended with Ben's return to Jane since he thinks that the remaining ten minutes is detrimental to the film. The boardroom climax circulated on VCD versions of the film (which also lacked several other sequences) has been since restored on the two recent DVD reissues as a special feature. However, the boardroom ending may have resulted from producer demands to shorten the film rather than having anything to do with Woo's original intention. Even if Woo originally meant the film to end there, he could also have had second thoughts about it.
- 30 The reference to the 1991 Triad film about Limpy Ho, *To Be Number One* also featuring Waise Lee, is not accidental. Anybody familiar with Triad movies would immediately recognize that Paul is not involved in any legitimate business. See Tony Williams, "The Hong Kong Gangster Movie." *Gangster Film Reader*. Ed. Alain Silver and James Ursini. New York: Limelight Editions, 2007, 357–80.
- 31 See Martin Booth, *The Dragon Syndicates: The Global Phenomenon of the Triads*. New York: Carrol & Graf, 1999.
- 32 According to Waise Lee, he meant the death of Paul to contain overtones of a soul finally gaining release from torment. See "An Interview with Waise Lee," Special Features. Fortune Star/Joy Films DVD version of *Bullet in the Head*.

Chapter 3 Aftermath

- 1 See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bullet_in_the_Head.
- 2 These trailers are available as Special Features on the Fortune Star/Joy Films DVD edition of *Bullet in the Head*.
- 3 See Stephen Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions*. London: BFI Publishing, 1997, 178.
- 4 Teo, 179.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 See Lisa Odham Stokes and Michael Hoover, *City on Fire: Hong Kong Cinema*. London: Verso, 1999, 184. Chang's comment also evokes the bemused reaction of Robert Aldrich's businessman father concerning the conflict between integrity and economic corruption facing Jack Palance's Charlie Castle in *The Big Knife* (1955): "If a guy has to take or not to take \$5,000 a week, what the hell is the problem?" See Charles Higham and Joel Greenberg, *The Celluloid Muse: Hollywood Directors Speak*. London: Angus and Robertson, 1969, 30.
- 7 Teo, 179–80.
- 8 See *Vietnam War Films*. Eds. Jean-Jacques Malo and Tony Williams.
- 9 See Stokes and Hoover, 167–200.
- 10 "Biting the Bullet: An interview with Simon Yam" and "Tempting Fire: An interview with Patrick Leung," Special Features. *Hong Kong Legends* DVD version.
- 11 "Baptism of Fire: An Interview with Jackie Cheung"; Bey Logan audio-commentary, Special Features. *Hong Kong Legends* DVD version.
- 12 Leung, "Tempting Fire."
- 13 Ibid. I also wish to thank Ken Hall who has supplied me with information from interviews with Terence Chang concerning the disputed nature of the original ending. Apparently, the film was meant to end with a fade to black after the boardroom sequence. Everyone was working frantically in shifts to try to develop a workable cut for general release since this was scheduled soon after the prescreening. Due to hostile responses on the part of distributors, demands were made for re-editing due to the length of the original prescreening version. Ken Hall, emails May 13, 2007. Woo may have had to shoot some new sequences such as Ben killing Paul in the boardroom and

the final ten minutes that occur in most versions today. Had Woo's original ended with no violent confrontation in the boardroom with Ben merely content to make Paul "lose face" in front of his Triad organization making his future existence a "living hell," similar to Frank's in the later Saigon scenes, then the film would have concluded on a more somber note like the Hong Kong theatrical version of *Infernal Affairs* where Andy Lau Tak-wah's character survives but remains trapped by his guilty conscience. If this is so, then Woo's envisaged ending paralleled the original climax of *Apocalypse Now* that provided no definitive resolution. It left Willard's decision to leave or take Kurtz's place entirely up to the audience.

- 14 See Kenneth E. Hall, *John Woo: The Films*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 1999, 142. The Wikipedia entry on *Bullet in the Head* refers to two such sequences that probably represent what remains of the lost footage. In the first scene, Ben walks through some numbered footprints taped to the dance floor to demonstrate one of his dance moves. A fragment restored to the Fortune Star/Joy Films DVD version reveals a brief mid-shot of Ben instructing a student before clutching his chest in pain — a telling reference to his other role of leading his friends in that other dance of violence depicted in the credit sequence.
- 15 *The Beguiled* actually had a brief release in London but was hastily withdrawn from circulation and then safely released in England after the success of *Dirty Harry* over a year later.
- 16 Following Chow Yun-fat's withdrawal from the Mainland Chinese production *Red Cliff* (based on *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*), Tony Leung returned to work with Woo for the first time since *Hard Boiled*.
- 17 For some alternative arguments concerning some of Woo's Hollywood films and their reception, see Tony Williams, "Woo's Most Dangerous Game: *Hard Target* and Neoconservative Violence." *Mythologies of Violence in Postmodern Media*. Ed. Christopher Sharrett. Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1999, 397–412; "Face/Off: Cultural and Institutional Violence within the American Dream." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 18.1 (2001): 31–38; "Mission Impossible 2 or 'Alice in Cruiseland'." *Asian Cinema* 15.1 (2004): 203–16; Lisa Odham Stokes, "John Woo's War: Real (Reel) Dreams,

Windtalkers and the Hollywood Machine.” *Asian Cinema* 15.1 (2004): 187–202. Alan Mak has also noticed how difficult it is for John Woo to “make a movie in Hollywood in his own style” with the exception of *Face/Off*. See Gina Marchetti, “Interview with Andrew Lau and Alan Mak.” In *Andrew Lau and Alan Mak’s Infernal Affairs: The Trilogy*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007, 177.