Film Review

John Woo's Face/Off : A Lesson in Moral Ambiguity

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The history of quality film is closely linked to the concept of moral ambiguity. Except for a number of experimental films that question the cinematic means of expression or enlarge the canon of cinematic language, moral ambiguity has remained a landmark feature of narrative film. The term itself, though, as applied to the world of "moving images," is multi-layered. It might refer to silent movies such as *Nosferatu* (F.W. Murnau 1922) or *The Phantom of the Opera* (Rupert Julian 1925) in which Max Schreck and Lon Chaney respectively transform their supposedly horrible film characters into touching entities beyond an established binary opposition between good and evil. It might also refer to the bleak world of American or French film noir in which gangsters and cops alike are neither black nor white; they represent the same colour as Al Pacino in Harold Becker's superb *City Hall* (1995), the colour of gray. Pacino's part is also a fine example of another basic feature of moral ambiguity film; very often, famous actors are cast against their established role profiles. Other recent examples of such casting strategies include John Cusack as killer in *Grosse Point Blank* (George Armitage 1997), Robert De Niro as gangster in Heat (Michael Mann 1996) and Kris Kristofferson as corrupt sheriff in *Lone Star* (John Sayles 1996). The most outstanding moral ambiguity film of recent years, however, is John Woo's *Face/Off* (1997), an action movie which redefines an entire genre.

Moral ambiguity has already been a central feature of Woo's Hong Kong movies, especially of *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) and *The Killer* (1989). In the latter, a professional hitman teams up with a police officer against the mafia; throughout the film, the killer wears white, and the policeman is dressed in black. In the end, the killer's death in the name of the law is transformed into a moment of repent and spiritual salvation. The killer has been found too good for this world. Thus, any borderline between good and evil gets blurred; the film is morally ambiguous, not unlike Jean-Pierre Melville's elegiac gangster movies which Woo seems to have studied intensely.

Critics and fans alike felt that subtlety and human warmth had totally disappeared from Woo's first two American movies. *Hard Target* (1993) and *Broken Arrow* (1996) seemed to have been entirely directed by their FX sections. In that respect, *Face/Off* marks a real return to form, a return to the director's beginnings.

For six years Sean Archer (John Travolta) has been chasing the man who killed his little son. When he finally gets hold of Castor Troy (Nicolas Cage), a real nightmare starts. Troy, who has fallen into a coma after having been sucked in by a huge turbine, has placed a nuclear bomb somewhere in Los Angeles. In order to get the information from Troy's pathological brother Pollux (Alessandro Nivola), Archer has to follow Pollux into his maximum security prison and gain his confidence. For that reason, Archer has to undergo an identity change. A newly developed operation technique transplants Troy's face on his. Archer's voice is altered as well. Troy, however, awakens from his coma, kills his guards and has Archer's face transplanted on the bloody lines of his skull. Then Troy kills everybody who knows about the highly secret FBI operation. Now Archer is trapped in the body of his arch rival; captured in a maximum security prison of "distopian" dimension, he has to learn that Troy has started to occupy his place even as a husband; he has moved in with his wife Eve (Joan Allen). Thus, a conventional metaphor of "losing face" is turned into a narrative device; an entire action movie is based on a postmodern element of identity switch.

The result is a movie which implies a hidden identity between good and evil. Cage not only seduces Travolta's wife with his rival's face; he also learns to imitate his gestures and special way of walking while, simultaneously, always pointing to a fundamental difference by overacting his role. Troy, on the other hand, has to become more and more like Cage to survive in his murderous surroundings, his prison. He has to undergo an adaptation process that reveals great suffering and inner turmoil. The way both men become more and more alike while, at the same time, they retain a notion of their "real selves" is an example of first-class acting. In this manner, the film reveals a degree of psychological profundity which is sadly absent from most action movies. Even minor parts such as Gina Gershon's (Troy's girlfriend Sasha) are carefully developed so that the film invites us to a strange and highly disturbing walk on a borderline between good and evil which, in the film's best moments, remains totally undefined.

The outstanding care Woo invests into the depiction of his morally complex characters is echoed in his understanding of the visual possibilities of the medium. The whole film and its camera work seem to be inspired by the circular movement of the turbine which, in a moment of metonymical extension, reappears as the circle of light in Troy's operation hall. Not only here the camera is involved in a constant dance from Good to Bad, from Ying to Yang. When Archer/Cage puts earphones on Castor Troy's little son, the sound of gunfight is gradually replaced by Judy Garland's "Over the Rainbow" which overpowers us in glorious quadraphonic sound. Simultaneously, the gunfight itself turns into a slow-motion ballet, into a

silent dance. For Sam Peckinpah slow-motion was a visual gimmick to heighten the effects of violence; for John Woo it becomes a kind of language which conveys and reaffirms a view of the world that is entirely based on the notion of moral complexity.

Action movie of the decade, no doubt.