

The Angel of Death: Targetting the Hitman

Andrew Spicer

Big Babe Lazich (Zero Mostel): ‘Now I’m ready for the big stuff. Maybe even a killing’.
Joseph Rico (Ted de Corsia): ‘Never say that. A murder is a contract, a hit the sucker that gets killed. Remember those words and use them’. [The Enforcer, 1951]

Rayburn (Christopher Walken): ‘A man can be an artist at anything ... It depends on how good he is at it. Creasy’s art is death. He’s about to paint his masterpiece’. [Referring to John W. Creasy (Denzil Washington), Man on Fire, 2004]

Martin Q. Blank (John Cusack): ‘A psychopath kills for no reason. I kill for money. It’s a job’. [Grosse Pointe Blank, 1997]

[A] Introduction

The hitman has become a familiar figure in crime films, one of its conventional cast of characters that is routinely used; the Internet Movie Database lists nearly 500 examples. Depictions of hitmen range historically from While the City Sleeps (1928) through to the present, as in No Country for Old Men (2007); from art house, Seijun Suzuki’s Koroshi no rakuin (Branded to Kill, 1967), to populist, Smokin’ Aces (2006) whose tagline was ‘let the best hitman win’; and stylistically from the grubby naturalism of Little Odessa (1994) to the high-tech orchestration of Bangkok Dangerous (2008). Indeed, hitmen are everywhere: not only in films, but on television, for instance ITV’s recent series Rough

Justice (2008); in popular fiction, including Parnell Hall's novel Hitman (2007) and Garth Ennis and Joel McCrea's graphic novel series Hitman; and in videogames, notably Eidos's bestselling Hitman series which, in 2007, spawned a novelization by William C. Dietz and a film spin-off starring Timothy Olyphant as Agent 47, a genetically-enhanced clone trained to assassinate targets. From at least The Assassination Bureau (1969) onwards there have been comedic/parodic versions, a sure indication of the maturity and popularity of a figure, including Charley Partanna 'the All-American Hood' (Jack Nicholson) in Prizzi's Honor (1985), Martin Q. Blank (John Cusack) in Grosse Pointe Blank (1997), or Ray (Colin Farrell) and Ken (Brendan Gleeson) in the intelligent and enjoyable In Bruges (2008), ordered to lie low in the picturesque Belgian town after Ray had bungled an assignment.

Despite this proliferation of hitmen, the figure – unlike the serial killer, another embodiment of the ultimate transgressor who dispenses death – has elicited virtually no critical analysis. There is a short entry by Kim Newman in The BFI Companion to Crime (in Hardy, 1997, p. 166), Andrew Horton's overview essay on 'Political Assassination Thrillers' (Horton, 1994, pp. 310-318), a few parenthetical comments in studies of the American gangster and a brief and deliberately provocative newspaper article by Kevin Mather which argued that audiences enjoyed the hitman's 'deadly authority and glamour' and the 'thrill of power', and listed his choice of '10 best hitmen' (Mather, 2008). Many seminal hitman films including Get Carter (1971), The Day of the Jackal (1973), Nikita (1990) and Pulp Fiction (1994), have elicited extensive critical commentary – as have the films focused on in the present essay – but these accounts do not discuss the hitman itself as an evolving cultural type (for discussion of types, see Spicer, 2003, pp. 1-5).

In what follows, my aim is to provide a cultural history of the hitman, discussing its origins, development and its possible significance as a complex and highly ambivalent form of masculinity. However, rather than attempt an inevitably superficial overview, I shall focus on what I would argue is the most thrilling, disturbing and complex type of this multifaceted figure – the ‘angel of death’, the hired killer who is not only a consummate professional, but also an artist of execution, possessing a distinctively masculine beauty. In order to do this, I shall examine four influential films over a 60 year period that have helped to create this figure: This Gun for Hire (1942), Le Samourai (1967), Die xue shuang xiong (The Killer, 1989) and Collateral (2004), all of which star male leads noted for their good looks: Alan Ladd, Alain Delon, Chow Yun-Fat and Tom Cruise respectively. As will be immediately obvious, the angel of death is a transnational figure; however, each instance discussed bears the marks of both particular national cultures and specific historical moments. Therefore [avoids repetition of ‘in what follows’] I shall explore significant differences as well as continuities in what I will argue has become an important figure of modern urban myth, a tragic anti-hero who embodies power and a glamorous self-sufficiency but also a destructive death drive. As there has been so little critical discussion of the hitman, it is necessary to define terms, map out the general terrain, discuss the origins of the figure and trace its emergence as a modern icon before embarking on detailed analysis of particular examples.

[B] Definition, Origins and Popularisation

The hitman is someone paid to kill, hired, by an individual, an organisation or a government, to perform the contracted ‘hit’. The hitman may be distinguished from the vigilante who takes the law into his or her own hands, usually for personal reasons; the mercenary who is always part of a group; the revenger who has an explicitly personal motivation; the special/secret agent who, even if he is ‘licensed to kill’, is not employed solely for that reason; and the psychopath, who, as Martin Q. Blank in my third epigraph is keen to point out, kills for no reason. According to the Oxford English Dictionary the earliest use of the term ‘hitman’ was in John Philips’s novel Nightmare at Dawn (1971), but the term ‘hit’ was in circulation from at least the 1920s onwards and, of course, hitman is a modern term for the ancient craft of the assassin.¹ The Western gunslinger on the payroll of cattle barons was a generic variant, but for reasons of space I have chosen to focus on the modern urban hitman and the criminal, rather than the political, assassin.

The lineaments of the type began to emerge in Arthur Conan Doyle’s creation, Colonel Sebastian Moran, whom Sherlock Holmes describes in ‘The Adventure of the Empty House’, the opening story in The Return of Sherlock Holmes (1903-04), as the ‘second most dangerous man in London’ after his paymaster Professor Moriarty (Doyle, 1981, p. 492). Moran was an Eton and Oxford educated scion of the upper-class, son of Sir Augustus Moran the Minister to Persia and had a military career in India where he developed his ability as a marksman – ‘the best heavy-game shot our Eastern Empire has ever produced’ (p. 494) – before being hired by Moriarty as a long-range assassin. Moran is therefore not so much a product of modern society, but of an inexplicable corruption in

the genes of the English aristocracy: ‘some strong influence which came into the line of his pedigree’ (p. 494), as Holmes diagnoses.

The hitman as a specific product of modern urbanism derived from the development of organised crime in America in the 1920s. As David Ruth argues, by the mid-1920s, crime was no longer being portrayed as the random exploits of desperadoes, but as rational, calculating, professionalised and hierarchical. Modern gangs or mobs required the co-ordinated efforts of various specialists, experts in their field, one of which was the gunman – also referred to as the ‘strongarm’, ‘torpedo’ or ‘dropper’ – who was a highly paid specialist killer (Ruth, 1996, pp. 28-51). The notorious St. Valentine’s Day Massacre of 1929 was widely reported as being perpetrated by hired killers orchestrated from afar. Early newspaper reports from the late 1920s popularized and mythologized the figure, which migrated into sensational reportage – Herbert Astbury’s lurid accounts of criminal organisations in various American cities beginning with The Gangs of New York: An Informal History of the Underworld (1928) – and then into radio and film (see Ruth, pp. 57-62).

The hitman’s role gained greater prominence through the revelations concerning Murder Incorporated or Murder, Inc., in the 1930s and 1940s. Murder, Inc. was a journalists’ term for murders carried out on behalf of the National Crime Syndicate, which was run by infamous gangsters – Benjamin ‘Bugsy’ Segal, Meyer Lansky, Louis ‘Lepke’ Buchalter and included notorious hitmen such as Abe ‘Kid Twist’ Reles and Emanuel ‘Mendy’ Weiss. Although the reality was a loose association of New York gangsters prepared to kill for a fee, Murder, Inc. was mythologized into an invisible criminal empire that specialised in wholesale killing (Woodiwiss, 2001, p. 253). Ernest

Mandel argues that corporate crime introduced the idea of murder as a business and of the ‘killer [as] a professional, an expert, a technician in crime ... With the concept of “contract”, murder proclaims loud and clear its common ground with general commercial practice, motivated by the pursuit of profit’ (Mandel, 1984, p. 104).

However, although the hitman had become a semi-mythic figure at the heart of organised crime, contract killers were infrequently represented in fiction and films during the 1930s. This is because interest in the hitman was overshadowed by a fascination with the gangster, whose image provided, especially for Depression audiences, a compelling fantasy, albeit a criminal one, of the great American success story, the rags to riches rise of the individualist entrepreneur. As John McCarty notes, although ‘the shadowy figure of the contract killer had lurked about the edges of the gangster film almost from the beginning, the details of his occupation, including his motives and methods, had gone largely unexplored by filmmakers, even during the genre’s heyday of the 1930s’ (2004, p. 210).

[B] English Beginnings: Edgar Wallace

In Britain, by contrast, where interest in the gangster was less pronounced, a more developed interest in the hitman was first shown by Edgar Wallace who had featured a quartet of assassins in his first novel, Four Just Men (1905). It is worth pausing on Wallace, now an undeservedly neglected writer but who was hugely popular during the interwar period in both Britain and America (Glover, 1994, pp. 144, 148; Watson, 1987, p. 75). Wallace’s short visit to Chicago in 1924 and his familiarity with the sensationalized reporting of American corporate crime became the raw material for the

plays-turned-novels On the Spot: Violence and Murder in Chicago (1930/1931) and When the Gangs Came to London (1932). On the Spot – the title deriving from the phrase ‘putting on the spot’, the place where the victim is to be murdered – was preoccupied by the figure of the gangster, Tony Pirelli (played on stage by Charles Laughton), but had hitmen as important ancillary figures. These include Ricardo, Pirelli’s ‘favourite machine-gun chopper’ (Wallace, 1985, p. 845) who embodied the new ethics of the contract killer who kills for money or survival: ‘when we bump off a man there’s a reason, and when we do it, it’s been worth doing’ (p. 852). When the Gangs Came to Britain focused more specifically on the contract killer, Albuquerque ‘Kerky’ Smith who works for one of the two rival Chicago Gangs which are invading London. Captain Jiggs Allerman of the Chicago Detective Bureau, sent to stiffen Scotland Yard during this crisis, explains to Chief Inspector Terry Weston: ‘That’s the kind you don’t know in England – killers without mercy, without pity, without anything human to ‘em! ... You don’t know the cold-bloodedness of ‘em – I hope you never will’ (Wallace, 1974, pp. 19-20). In view of later developments, it is important to note that although Smith is a cool, fastidious and immaculately dressed professional – ‘perfectly tailored in a large-pattern grey check’ – Wallace depicts him as ugly: ‘His hair was close-cropped; his long, emaciated face, seamed and lined from eye to jaw, was not pleasant to look at, and the two scars that ran diagonally down the left side of his face did not add to his attractiveness’ (pp. 17-18).

[B] The Anti-Hero: Graham Greene's A Gun for Sale

Graham Greene admired Wallace and was influenced by his prescient interest in the new phenomenon of organised crime. However, A Gun for Sale (1936) discards the sensational, journalistic aspects of Wallace's presentation in order to explore the hitman in depth as a pathological case. For Greene, the most disturbing aspect of the contract killer is his anonymity as well as his moral indifference to killing: 'Murder didn't mean much to Raven. It was just a new job ... He carried an attaché case. He looked like any other youngish man going home after work; his dark overcoat had a clerical air' (1963, p. 5). A Gun for Sale, Greene noted in his autobiography Ways of Escape, was written in a period when patriotism had become discredited for thinking people and when the wholesome Buchanesque hero of his youth had become untenable (Greene, 1981, p. 54). Hence the need for a new figure, an anti-hero that would condense into itself feelings of doom and disillusionment in a society seemingly poised on the brink of war, a disturbing product of that dark and seedy world of drab mundaneness infused with a deep sense of dread that critics have dubbed 'Greenland'.

In parallel with American hard-boiled writers, Greene modernised the English thriller so that it could accommodate psychologically disturbed protagonists, at odds with society or pursued by nebulous threats, wracked by guilt and paranoias and with thwarted sexual desires. Raven is one such figure, an unattractive loner whose harelip that 'had been badly sewn in infancy, so that now the upper lip was twisted and scarred' (Greene, 1963, p. 5) is a repulsive disfigurement that partially explains his resentment, his fear of women and his cold, calculating ruthlessness. Although symptomatic of a dislocated society heading for war, Raven has also been forged by a destructively dysfunctional

family: 'He had been made by hatred; it had constructed him into this thin, smoky, murderous figure in the rain, hunted and ugly. His mother had borne him when his father was in gaol, and six years later, when his father was hanged for another crime, she had cut her own throat with a kitchen knife; afterwards there had been the home' (p. 66).

Raven is haunted by dreams and nightmares that stem from this trauma, and longs, as he confesses to Anne, the showgirl who befriends him, for the ministrations of a new type of doctor, a psychoanalyst, who would interpret his dreams and release him from their thrall.

In a deeply ironic plot, Raven is contracted by a wealthy industrialist to kill a socialist minister thereby provoking war in which the armament manufacturer can make a huge profit; but, in his determination to be revenged on his employers who pay him in marked notes, Raven becomes the unwitting agent of a form of justice in foiling the industrialist's schemes. However, as he dies following a fatal hesitation occasioned by a reluctance to shoot Anne's policeman boyfriend, what Greene emphasizes is not Raven's redemption, but his existential anguish: 'Death came to him in the form of unbearable pain. It was as if he had to deliver this pain as a woman delivers a child, and he sobbed and moaned in the effort. At last it came out of him, and he followed his only child into a vast desolation' (p. 170). Death is the only respite for Raven's profound alienation, the only 'cure' for this tormented figure.

[B] The Emergence of the 'Angelic Killer': Alan Ladd

Interest in the possibilities of filming Greene's novel was very rapid: Paramount acquired the rights to A Gun for Sale even before its publication in America as This Gun for Hire. But because Raven is such a deeply disturbing figure, the studio did not develop a script

until 1941, after Warner Bros. had released The Maltese Falcon and thus when the beginnings of film noir – a form that James Naremore astutely characterises as the fusion of ‘blood melodrama’ with the existential complexities of European modernism (pp. 64-81) – began to enable. Film noir, more profoundly than the gangster films, encouraged an exploration of the dark underside of American society. Screenwriters W. R. Burnett and Albert Maltz retained the basic structure of Greene’s novel, though unsurprisingly the action is switched from Europe to the American West Coast and the villains, following Pearl Harbour, turned into profiteers selling chemical formulae to the Japanese. However, the key difference was to make Raven an attractive figure. His harelip has gone, replaced by a deformed wrist, and he is played by the handsome 27 year-old Alan Ladd in his first major role. Ladd’s prominence in the story was enhanced after director Frank Tuttle viewed the first day’s rushes and realized the quality and potential of Ladd’s performance (Falk, 1984, p. 28).

Ladd’s minimalist performance, what Foster Hirsch aptly describes as his stiff movements, mask-like face and parched, expressionless voice (Hirsch 1981, p. 147), is superbly effective as a paranoid killer for whom every gesture is a potential betrayal or sign of weakness, but they also lend Raven a grace and beauty absent in Greene’s delineation. This Gun for Hire was an important film in the development of the characteristic noir aesthetics, and cinematographer John Seitz uses mirrors, odd angles, low-key lighting and fog bound exteriors to help create a sense of schizophrenia and entrapment that externalize Raven’s psychological disturbance; his face is often shot half in shadow, half in light, or with shafts of light falling across his body.² This rich chiaroscuro enhances the sculpted beauty of Ladd’s face, particularly in the central scene

in the deserted warehouse. Surrounded by the police dragnet, just as in the novel, he confesses to the showgirl (renamed Ellen and played by Veronica Lake) of his longing for a 'psych-something' who will end the terror of his dreams; it is a key moment that helps evoke sympathy for his character.

This aestheticization of Raven is part of a general softening of his character in Burnett and Maltz's adaptation. His pathology is glossed more conventionally as the result of killing his evil stepmother who beat him regularly and smashed his wrist with a red-hot iron. The ending is also sentimentalized with Raven asking Ellen for reassurance that he did well in killing Brewster the corrupt industrialist and thus aiding the war effort, and dying with a contrite little-boy smile that is a world way from Greene's terrifying 'vast desolation'. Even so, Ellen's over-emphatic clinch with her boyfriend Lieutenant Crane (Robert Preston) suggests that she is genuinely distressed by Raven's death, compounding the frisson that they established as an 'outlaw couple' and undermining Hollywood's investment in the lawful couple bound for marriage and domestic bliss. The film's subsequent publicity also emphasized the beauty of Ladd in the repose of death, with Lake gazing over his figure as if in mourning.

In their groundbreaking critical conspectus Panorama du film noir américain (1941-1953) published in 1955, Raymonde Borde and Etienne Chaumeton recognised the singularity of Raven and understood his importance:

In his role as the solitary hit man, Alan Ladd is a truly remarkable creation. His slight frame and his overly docile baby face, with its limpid eyes, its gentle unobtrusive features, appear to have come from some other planet, after all the

huge and brutal killers who peopled prewar gangster films. Only his expressionless features in situations of great tension reveal a fearsome, inhuman frigidity in this fallen angel. Alan Ladd, “angelic killer”, has become part of noir mythology ... a new kind of murderer (pp. 37-8).

However, the real significance and potential of the ‘angelic killer’ was not recognised in Hollywood at this point. Alan Ladd was used subsequently in much more conventional tough guy roles and the cycle of hitman films that developed in the 1950s, beginning with The Enforcer (1951), featured ugly and brutal killers, including Eli Wallach’s Dancer in The Lineup (1958) or Peter Falk’s incarnation of Abe Reles in Murder, Inc. (1960).³ Indeed, it was a French director, Jean-Pierre Melville, who sensed the mythopoeic possibilities of the ‘angel of death’ and, in Le Samourai (1967), shed much of the melodramatic baggage of Hollywood cinema in favour of a pared-down and uncompromising European modernism.

[B] The Tragic Artist: Le Samourai

Melville, well-known for his Americanophilia, was careful to dissociate his films from mere pastiche: ‘I make gangster films, inspired by gangster novels, but I don’t make American films, even though I like the American films noirs better than anything (Nogueira and Truchard, 1968, p. 119). Le Samourai – which forms a loose trilogy with Le Cercle Rouge (The Red Circle, 1970) and Un flic (Dirty Money, 1972), all starring Alain Delon – was Melville’s attempt to extend and develop the figure of the ‘angelic killer’ from This Gun for Hire. In Le Samourai Delon plays Jef Costello, a contract killer

who, as in the earlier film, is double-crossed by his paymasters who try to eliminate him as a bad risk after he is arrested and then released by the police. In homage to Ladd and the American gangster, Delon dresses in trench coat and homburg, becoming, as Stella Bruzzi notes, an epigrammatic distillation of the cinema gangster myth whose essence is a series of ‘citations and gestures’ (1997, p. 76), most famously expressed in his adjustment of the precise curve of his hat brim in the mirror before going out to complete a hit. However, these exquisitely executed movements are more than mere citation: they exemplify the arrogant detachment of the dandy whose every gesture is exact, expressive of the man who has turned his whole existence into a work of art. Jef inhabits a world, as Ginette Vincendeau argues, at once quintessentially French – the Citroën DS that Jef steals to make his hits or the extended chase on the Parisian underground – and mythic, a generic world already constructed iconographically by American crime thrillers, as in the extended presentation of the criminal line-up after Jef is arrested that is a direct allusion to the scene in John Huston’s The Asphalt Jungle (1951) (Vincendeau, 2003, p. 179).

Jef was a role specifically written for Delon⁴ whose persona in French cinema habitually signified a lone wolf and an homme fatal; he frequently played characters who are victims of their own misfortunes or mistakes (Hayes, 2004, pp. 46-7, 52-3). Delon had a dangerous, cruel, predatory beauty that was profoundly ambivalent, combining malevolent cynicism and sadistic cruelty with a wounded, melancholic masculinity. His liquid blue eyes, seemingly on the verge of tears, attested to a softness that, like his avatar Jean Gabin, appropriated a feminine vulnerability into a virile persona (Vincendeau, 2000, pp. 176, 180-181). Like Ladd, Delon’s acting style was minimalist, complemented by Henri Decaë’s austere cinematography with its muted blue-greys – where the colours

of even ordinary objects such the label on the bottle of Vichy water, or a Gauloise cigarette packet are grey-black copies of the brightly coloured originals – that provides the visual equivalent to Delon’s beauty, cold and still. In Melville’s conception, Jef is neither the product of social dislocation – ‘I was careful not to make him a parachutist washed up after the war in Indo-China or Algeria, who had been taught to kill for his country!’ (Nogueira, 1971, pp. 126-27) – nor of a dysfunctional family, but a schizophrenic: ‘a hired killer ... is by definition a schizophrenic ... neither crook nor gangster ... He is an “innocent”, in the sense that a schizophrenic doesn’t know he’s a criminal, although he is a criminal in his logic and his way of thinking’ (Nogueira, p. 126, original emphasis). Melville tries to capture this schizophrenic logic by what Colin MacArthur has called a ‘cinema of process’ in which events and procedures unfold in a way that is significantly closer to ‘real’ time than Hollywood cinema (MacArthur, 2000, p. 191). Hence the obsessively detailed texture of the film, including the scenes where Jef steals his getaway car, laboriously trying one key after another in the ignition. Melville also frequently halts a conventional tracking shot but continues with a zoom before starting to track again in order to create a disturbingly ‘elastic rather than classical sense of dilation’ that is expressive of Jef’s schizophrenia (Nogueira, p. 130).

However, if Jef is a portrait of a schizophrenic, he is also a samurai, the modern version of a noble and honourable warrior caste. Melville and Delon had a shared passion for samurai iconography and values (Nogueira, p. 129; Vincendeau, 2000, pp. 175-6). Jef embodies the Japanese feudal code, grounded in historical realities but elevated through fiction to the level of myth, which gives value and status to this lonely, self-possessed figure, as delineated in the opening quotation from Melville’s invented text, Bushido

(The Book of the Samurai): ‘There is no more profound solitude than the samurai’s, except that of the tiger in the jungle ... perhaps.’ Jef is a modern ronin, a ‘wave man’, an outcast who wanders from place to place but, like all samurai, is utterly dedicated to the exactitudes of a code which demands that a duty – even a contracted hit – be performed whatever one’s personal feelings. It is a code that approves of suicide and the nobility of failure, recognizing that the samurai is engaged in a doomed struggle that will lead inevitably to his death but who, in the process, becomes a tragic, sacrificial hero (Desser 1983, pp. 14-15, 21-5, 33-6). But, as J. L. Anderson remarks, the Japanese conception of tragedy is not an Aristotelian catharsis but an exploration of the beauty of melancholia (1967, p. 7).

This melancholic beauty is realized through the inexorable logic of Jef’s eventual death, presaged in the opening scene where, in a long still take of his darkened room, he eventually rises from his bed like a corpse awakening, embodying, as Melville remarked, death in motion (Nogueira, p. 130). Valérie (Cathy Rosier), the black pianist who fascinates Jef, is an allegorical figure of death itself – ‘a black Death in white, hold[ing] the charm that captivates’ (in Nogueira, p. 134), and therefore functions as a metaphor for Jef ‘fall[ing] in love with his own death’. Jef knows that his second contract to eliminate her is a set-up, but it is one in which he actively colludes because he can now choose the place and time of his death. In a slow-paced ritualistic scene, Jef is shot by police marksmen as he points his gun at Valérie in the nightclub, crossing his elegantly white-gloved hands over his upper chest as he collapses. When the police inspector reveals that there were no bullets in his gun, we recognize that it was a deliberate suicide. By carrying out the hit to the point of the actual killing, Jef has proved that he could, if he so wished,

have completed his contract, thus preserving his honour and the samurai code. Thus, in Le Samourai, the hitman becomes what he could not be in American cinema with its psychological realism and relentless demands for causality, the abstract embodiment of an inexplicable but profoundly masculine solipsistic existentialism that to Melville was the logical development of Alan Ladd's 'angelic killer'. His deliberately chosen and beautiful demise is of a piece with a life dedicated to the artistry of death.

[B] The Romantic Loser: Die xue shuang xiong /The Killer (1989)

Melville's conception of the hitman as an honourable but tragic figure influenced several Hollywood directors (Vincendeau, 2003, p. 185), but Le Samourai's combination of Western and Eastern traditions meant that its impact was felt nowhere more powerfully than in the films of John Woo, another director who combined a reverence for American cinema with a strong sense of national identity in his development of what has been called Hong Kong's 'heroic bloodshed' cinema, contemporary action thrillers that could compete with American cinema on its own turf (see Logan, 1996). Woo has acknowledged that: 'Melville is God for me. ... Le Samourai is one of the foreign films which had most influence on Hong Kong cinema, especially that of the younger generation' (qtd. Hall, 2009, p. 50). Woo borrowed the iconographic look of Melville's hitman in his breakthrough film, A Better Tomorrow (1986), but although The Killer (1989) uses [avoids repetition of borrows] Melville's basic storyline – in both films the professional killer allows himself to be identified and therefore must be eliminated resulting in his double pursuit by both police and criminal gang – the influence of Le Samourai goes much deeper. Woo read Melville's film as more about 'the way a gangster

thinks and feels [than] about how he behaves’, seeing Jef as ‘a criminal who is facing death and coming to terms with a life devoted to violence’, who ‘achieves a kind of redemption at the end by accepting his fate gracefully. To me, this is the most romantic attitude imaginable’ (qtd. Hall, 1999, p. 55). Thus the hitman Ah Jong (Chow Yun-Fat) in The Killer is Woo’s attempt to create a similarly mythopoeic figure, another beautiful, poised artist of death who incarnates a complex set of attitudes and values that are contemporary but with deep cultural roots. It is a figure that exemplifies the cultural and ideological hybridity of Hong Kong itself as a contradictory entity, both Chinese and capitalist.⁵

Although Ah Jong is a thoroughly contemporary figure who wears a succession of Armani suits that bespeak a cosmopolitan consumerism (Baron, 2004, pp. 298-99), Woo regarded him as a contemporary incarnation of the ancient Chinese knight errant, which, like the samurai, although wandering and lawless, possessed a tradition of chivalry, honour and loyalty (Liu 1967, pp. 1-2; 4-7 and passim). Although heroic, the knight-errant, again like the samurai, is fated to follow a path that is predetermined and unchangeable in which he has to recognize the fragility of life and the need to prepare for death (Bliss, 2002, p. 9). Woo commented that his characters ‘are often solitary, tragic figures, who have a rendezvous with death’ (qtd. Hall, 2009, p. 50). Thus, although there is ample fast-paced action, an abundance of sadistic cruelty and violence in The Killer, its most characteristic timbre is melancholic, infused by the nostalgic longing for a vanished world, expressing Woo’s sense that ‘people have lost traditional values’ and paradoxically that the professional killer was the repository of those vanished values that Woo thought it was his ‘duty to bring [...] back’ (qtd. Bliss, p. 113). Ah Jong, first

glimpsed in a church that symbolizes Woo's embrace of Western Catholicism, is engaged on a path of spiritual redemption, anxious to break with his Triad connections, a task made all the more urgent when, in the film's first hit, he accidentally blinds a beautiful nightclub singer Jennie (Sally Yeh). He takes on one final hit in order to raise sufficient funds for the operation to restore her sight.

If Melville's Jef provided the palimpsest for Woo's hitman, Woo's syncretic postmodern visual style – that eclectically combines genres and techniques derived from a broad variety of sources and directors – is radically different. Building on the tradition of wuxia pain (Chinese swordplay) and kung-fu films, Woo choreographs an operatic gunplay in Ah Jong's triumphs against seemingly impossible odds. As Woo remarked: 'When I have my hero diving in the air, or shooting with two guns, it's pretty much like ballet' (qtd. Bliss, pp. 111-12). Woo's penchant for a mobile, moving camera, circling and zooming, and his frequent slow-motion sequences inspired by Scorsese and Peckinpah, creates a world of heightened theatricality in which the hyperbolic violence is dominated by the spectacle of Chow Yun-Fat's sumptuously clothed body, from the full-length black evening coat and a long, billowing white scarf of the first scene to the white Armani suit in which he fights the final battle.

The action sequences, though, have a function beyond that of visceral spectacle, they are an expression of the characters' inner compulsions and frustrations and are used as one of the forms of male bonding that characterize Woo's films. Although Woo draws attention to the inner solitariness of his protagonists, The Killer, unlike This Gun for Hire or Le Samouraï, is not so much about loneliness as about male friendship – the literal translation of the film's Chinese title is 'Two Heroes Battling with Gangsters'. Ah Jong

has a long-standing bond with fellow hitman Fung Sei (Chu Kong) who, under pressure from his Triad bosses, betrays their friendship but later redeems himself and reaffirms their bond even at the cost of torture, brutal beatings and eventual death. Ah Jong is also paired against Inspector Li (Danny Lee), the rule-bending policeman who tries to capture him. In the course of his pursuit, Li becomes more and more obsessed with Ah Jong, desperate to understand him. Both are filmed in identical poses in their respective apartments, listening intently to the soulful ballads sung by Jennie. During the course of the film, Li and Ah Jong become firm friends, revealing their mutual admiration for each other's daring, skill and professionalism. They even invent pet names for each other, first to deceive Jennie and then to express their friendship. In the protracted shoot-outs where the pair battle the Triad gang led by the venal gangster Wong-Hoi (Shing Fui-On), Ah Jong and Li are frequently shown firing their weapons in harmony, moving in synchronized time and motion. The shoot-outs are complemented by gentler scenes, as in the aftermath of the first battle where Li treats Ah Jong for a gunshot injury – in Le Samourai Jef tends his own wound – a tender moment of male love in which they are united as men of honour in a fallen world. It parallels an earlier scene in which Ah Jong and Fung Sei, on a roadside overlooking the beauty of Hong Kong harbour, muse on the impermanence of life and the overriding importance of loyalty and friendship; themes that are also presented in the numerous flashbacks that punctuate the action. Woo represents a new kind of male action hero, offering a protagonist who is both violent and sensitive, combining male and female qualities, and struggling as much with his own inner compulsions as his adversaries (Hanke, 199, pp. 39-47). As Jillian Sandell notes, in Hong Kong cinema this male bonding can suggest an erotic charge 'without the

associated anxiety such relationships often trigger within the Hollywood action genre', with Woo's heroes nostalgic for a time when male intimacy was a celebrated and valorized aspect of masculinity (Sandell, 1996, p. 30).

However, Woo's presentation of the redemptive qualities of male bonding and his nostalgic conception of an heroic warrior masculinity is conditioned by his sense, derived from Melville and from his Chinese sources, of the inexorability of fate. In the final gunfight, in the church where the film started, Ah Jong is not only killed but blinded so that, even in death, he cannot pass on his eyes to Jennie and right his wrong. Woo overrode Yun-Fat's suggestion that they should die in each other's arms in favour of the now blind pair crawling past each other without contact because: 'It will make it more tragic, and more like they have been played by fate' (qtd. Elder, 2005, p. 80). However, as Woo also acknowledged, the final shot is of Ah Jong playing the harmonica, which symbolized 'an unforgettable friendship' (qtd. Elder, 2005, p. 80). Thus despite Woo's 'angelic killer' failing, his life is redeemed by his capacity to inspire the loyalty and friendship of his male associates.

[B] The Deracinated Global Professional: Collateral (2004)

Although Woo's delineation of the angelic killer was highly influential (see Hall, 2009, pp. 57-71), Hollywood's subsequent development of the figure shed the 'excessive' elements of male bonding in favour of a focus on the lone assassin. Thus although Michael Mann's Collateral (2004) has similar highly orchestrated set piece shoot-outs, its killer, although still the beautiful angel of death (played by Tom Cruise), is in many ways a return to This Gun for Hire and the anonymity of the hitman. The crucial difference was

that Mann's hitman exists in a thoroughly contemporary context of deracinated global capitalism and the action takes place in the diffuse modern metropolis of Los Angeles. Mann adapted Stuart Beattie's The Last Domino that depicted the clash between a ruthless hitman, Vincent (Cruise), and Max (Jamie Foxx), an indecisive African American [I was pulled up in another piece for Afro-American] cabbie who inadvertently becomes the assassin's courier as Vincent sets about killing five key potential witnesses in one night before the Grand Jury trial the following morning.⁶ Although he admired the 'highly poetic symmetry and intensity' (qtd. Feeney and Duncan, 2006, p. 169) of Beattie's story and left its structure intact, Mann changed the location from New York to Los Angeles in order to explore the dispersed multiculturalism of this city with no centre, a 'series of tenuously interconnected zones that are not contiguous' (Olsen, 2004a, p. 15). As Michael J. Anderson notes, the denouement takes place in the postmodern urban landscape of the 'New Downtown' sector of LA with its orgy of post-1960s steel and glass. This depopulated core, anonymous and dehumanised but visually beautiful (Anderson, 2004), is thus expressive of the dissociated emptiness that characterises Vincent himself. It is a night-time LA, shot almost entirely on high-definition video (HDV). Mann chose HDV because of its far greater sensitivity to nocturnal light than conventional celluloid and much greater depth of field; [retain comma] and also because of its 'painterly' qualities (Olsen, 2004b, p. 16), which enabled Mann to change the contrast and adjust the colour in order to make the nocturnal city 'three-dimensional', at once realistic but also dreamlike, hypnotically beautiful but cold and alienating.

In many ways Vincent seems to be the ideal person to navigate this new environment: the freewheeling, stateless professional, flying into LA airport like the

angel of death from some unspecified location in the pay of an offshore drugs cartel and moving relentlessly from one target to the next, needing no connection or place of belonging. Vincent, as Steven Rybin argues, is the ultimate critique of the American dream of unfettered individual enterprise whose life, defined by his work, has come to have no meaning, who adheres to the possibility of completely controlling one's destiny but also affects to believe in a vast cosmic indifference that renders actions pointless (Rybin, 2007, p. 174). Vincent is one of Mann's long line of self-destructive anti-heroes – as in The Thief (1981), Heat (1995) and Miami Vice (2006) – whose consummate but obsessive professionalism becomes emotionally and psychologically damaging. Cruise's performance is a masterpiece of contained, unspectacular athleticism where every action is so precisely co-ordinated as to appear automatic, operating as if by instinct, able to shift from friendliness to extreme aggression at the snap of a finger, and to fire off five shots in less than three seconds (City of Night, 2004).

Although outwardly immaculate in a neat grey suit, carefully trimmed beard and manicured grey hair, Vincent is, in Mann's conception, 'rough trade in a smart suit' (City of Night), beneath whose cool, elegant surface of the successful executive seethes a deep-seated instability and vulnerability. The cracks start to appear through his encounter with Max, whom Vincent initially patronises and derides because of Max's inability to make something of his life, his long-cherished but unrealised dreams of running a fleet of limousines. In the course of their enforced partnership – their relationship that of an inverted buddy movie – Vincent begins to reveal himself as damaged goods. Mann spent three months building up Vincent's character – the backstory of his brutal upbringing in Gary, Indiana, with no recollection of his mother and experiencing the violence of an

abusive, alcoholic father, living in a series of foster homes before spending over a decade in Special Forces where he learned the arts of killing. This detailed characterization meant that the story could come through in his exchanges with Max rather than through exposition or flashbacks that would interrupt the concentrated intensity of the action (City of Night). These instabilities are revealed in key moments – the regret at killing the jazz club owner who embodies the creativity that Vincent lacks; his desperation to make contact with Max’s hospitalized mother whom he insists they visit in order to preserve Max’s nightly routine. Max feeds off Vincent’s weaknesses, growing in strength and determination so that he can finally defeat him after the two exchange gunfire in a chance power-cut on the subway. As Max walks away with the girl of his dreams, Assistant US Attorney Annie (Jada Pinkett Smith) who was to be the fifth victim, the dead Vincent is left on the subway car, doomed to ride unnoticed for six hours just like the man in the story he told Max at the film’s opening, and which for Vincent summed up LA’s ‘disconnected sprawl’ where nobody knows or cares about each other. However, although Max’s triumph is that of the ordinary Everyman able to defeat the hitman who is implicitly acknowledged as the destructive product of white technocracy, Vincent’s death, collapsing gracefully forward in his seat in recognition that his hour has come, has an austere tragic dimension that lingers in the imagination.

[A] Conclusion

As I emphasized in the introduction, this discussion of the hitman has only considered one type, in my view the central and most powerful one, of a complex and constantly mutating figure that is capable of migrating across national cultures as well as historical

periods. A more comprehensive account than I could offer here would need, in particular, to analyze the comedic hitman and also the female assassin. That said, I should like to review the present argument and to offer some tentative conclusions to what is an exploratory enquiry.

The contemporary hitman is the product of modern urbanism and the development of organized crime in America during the 1920s that saw murder becoming a commercial business performed by a new professional elite. The cultural significance of this figure was eclipsed in the 1930s by the dynamic image of the gangster, but in Britain Edgar Wallace, then, much more significantly, Graham Greene, sensed the immense potential of the hitman as an image of dislocated modernity, a tormented anti-hero who embodied the social, sexual and familial dysfunctions of a society about to come apart under the threat of war. Hollywood cinema was unable to accommodate such a disturbing figure until the 1940s and the development of film noir, but in the process of adapting This Gun for Hire a change occurred with the image of Alan Ladd whose grace and beauty elicited sympathy as well as fear, transmuting the hitman into the angel of death, a mythopoeic figure whose demise carried with it the sense of tragic waste. This development was truncated in America, but picked up in France by the ‘American in Paris’, Jean-Pierre Melville in Le Samourai, which partially abstracted the figure into a generic, mythic space where the aesthetic aspects dominated. Melville’s melancholy hitman was a modern samurai, a man of honour whose ultimate hit is to choose the hour of his own death, dying gracefully, his integrity uncompromised.

The image of the hitman as a man of honour had to migrate again to another national culture in order to be developed further. John Woo’s The Killer positioned the

lonely samurai within a hybrid cultural mix that celebrated operatic gunplay but also male bonding which affirmed the sovereign values of loyalty and friendship in a world where they appeared to be in retreat. No such nostalgia for a past world pervades Michael Mann's Collateral whose hitman is a product of a thoroughly contemporary stateless global marketplace run by anonymous offshore corporations. Mann's hitman has the beauty and grace of the artist of death but one who has retreated into a solipsistic nihilism and can be defeated by the African American Everyman.

Although mutating historically and culturally, the angel of death has emerged as a potent figure of modern myth, a symbol of the perverse logic of capitalist enterprise, of a consummate but destructive professionalism dedicated to the art of killing. He is glamorous and powerful, but, more disturbingly, a figure of awe and wonder, beautiful and yet remote, unable to be contained within conventional social codes and bonds. In essence, I suggest, the figure is a highly masculine fantasy of total self-sufficiency, an inviolable completeness and the desire for absolute control over one's life and environment without any distracting ties, moral, emotional or social. He is thus a compelling figure of desire but also fear, because his loneliness is profound and his life dominated by the certainty of violent death. It is this complex ambivalence that makes the hitman such a potent figure which continues to fascinate audiences across the globe.

Works cited

- Anderson, J.L. (1973), 'Japanese swordfighters and American gunfighters'. Cinema Journal 12, (2), 1-21.
- Anderson, M. J. 'Before sunrise, or Los Angeles plays itself in a lonely place', <http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/04/33/collateral.html>; (accessed 14 July, 2009).
- Baron, C. (2004), 'Suiting up for postmodern performance in John Woo's The Killer', in C. Baron, D. Carson and F. P. Tomasulo (eds.), More than a Method: Trends and Traditions in Contemporary Film Performance. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 297-329.
- Belfield, R. (2008), Assassination: The Killers and their Paymasters Revealed. London: Magpie Books.
- Bernstein, L. (2002), The Greatest Menace: Organized Crime in Cold War America. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press. [space added]
- Biesen, S. C. (2005), Blackout: World War II and the Origins of Film Noir. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Bliss, M. (2002), Between the Bullets: The Spiritual Cinema of John Woo. Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press.
- Borde, R. and E. Chaumeton (2002), A Panorama of American Film Noir, 1941-1953 trans. Paul Hammond. San Francisco: City Lights Books. First published in French in 1955.
- Bruzzi, S. (1997), Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in the Movies. London: Routledge.

- Clarens, C. (1997), Crime Movies: An Illustrated History of the Gangster Genre from D.W Griffith to 'Pulp Fiction'. Updated by Foster Hirsch. New York: Da Capo Press.
- Desser, D. (1983), The Samurai Films of Akira Kurosawa. Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press.
- Doyle, Sir A. C. (1981), The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Elder, R. (ed.) (2005), John Woo: Interviews. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Falk, Q. (1984), Travels in Greenland: The Cinema of Graham Greene. London: Quartet Books.
- Feeney F. X. and P. Duncan (eds.) (2006), Michael Mann. [underlining of full-point removed] Hong Kong: Taschen.
- Glover, D. (1994), 'Looking for Edgar Wallace: the author as consumer'. History Workshop Journal, 37, (1), 143-64.
- Goldsmith, D. (2004), 'Collateral: Stuart Beattie's character-driven thriller'. Creative Screenwriting 11, (4), 50-53.
- Greene, G. (1963), A Gun for Sale. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Greene, G. (1981), Ways of Escape. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Hall, K. E. (1999), John Woo: The Films. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
- Hall, K. E. (2009), John Woo's 'The Killer'. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Hanke, R. (1999), 'John Woo's cinema of hyperkinetic violence: from A Better Tomorrow to Face/Off'. Film Criticism 2, (1), 39-59.
- Hardy, P. (ed.) (1997), The BFI Companion to Crime. London: BFI Publishing/Cassell.

- Hayes, G. (2004), 'Framing the wolf: The spectacular masculinity of Alain Delon', in P. Powrie, A. Davies and B. Babington (eds.), The Trouble with Men: Masculinities in European and Hollywood Cinema. London: Wallflower Press.
- Hirsch, F. (1981), The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.
- Horton, A. (1994), 'Political assassination thrillers', in G. Crowdus (ed.), The Political Companion to American Film. Chicago and London: Fitzroy Dearbon, 310-318.
- Lewis, B. (2003), The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam. London: Phoenix.
- Liu, J. J.Y. (1967), The Chinese Knight-Errant. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Logan, B. (1996), Hong Kong Action Cinema. Woodstock, New York: The Overlook Press.
- MacArthur, C. (2000), 'Mise-en-scène degree zero: Jean-Pierre Melville's Le Samuraï (1967)', in S. Hayward and G. Vincendeau (eds.), French Film Texts and Contexts (revised edn). London: Routledge, 189-201.
- McCarty, J. (2004), Bullets Over Hollywood: The American Gangster Film from the Silents to 'The Sopranos'. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.
- Mandel, E. (1984), Delightful Murder: A Social History of the Crime Story. London: Pluto Press.
- Mather, K. (2008), 'Why the screen loves a deadly assassin', *The Times*, 12 April.
- Naremore, J. (2008), More than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts. (Revised edition). Berkley: University of Los Angeles Press.
- Olsen, M. (2004a), 'It happened one night'. Sight and Sound, (10), 14-15.

- Olsen, M. (2004b), 'Paint it Black'. (Interview with Michael Mann). Sight and Sound, (10), 16.
- Nogueira R. (ed.) (1971), Melville on Melville. London: Secker and Warburg.
- Nogueira, R. and Truchaud, F. (1968), 'A samurai in Paris', Sight and Sound, 37, (3), 119-23.
- Ruth, D. E. (1996), Inventing the Public Enemy: The Gangster in American Culture, 1918-1934. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rybin, S. (2007), The Cinema of Michael Mann. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Sandell, J. (1996), 'Reinventing masculinity: the spectacle of male intimacy in the films of John Woo'. Film Quarterly, 49 (4), 23-34.
- Spicer, A. (2003), Typical Men: The Representation of Masculinity in Popular British Cinema. London: I. B. Tauris.
- Vincendeau, G. (2000), Stars and Stardom in French Cinema. London: Continuum.
- Vincendeau, G. (2003), Jean-Pierre Melville: An American in Paris. London: BFI Publishing.
- Wallace, E. (1985), Selected Novels. London: Hamlyn.
- Wallace, E. (1974), When the Gangs Came to London. London: Arrow Books.
- Watson, C. (1987), Snobbery with Violence: English Crime Stories and Their Audience. London: Methuen.
- Williams. T. (1997), 'Space, place, and spectacle: the crisis cinema of John Woo'. Cinema Journal, 36, (2), 67-84.
- Woodiwiss, M. (2001), Organized Crime and American Power: A History (Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Audio-Visual

City of Night: The Making of 'Collateral'. Included in the DreamWorks two-disc special edition DVD, 2004.

Notes

¹ See Belfield, 2008, pp. 59-70 and note 9, pp. 289-90; see also Lewis, 2003.

² As Sheri Beisen argues, the driving force behind the film's innovative visual style was art director Hans Dreier who had been trained at UFA and was familiar with German Expressionism (Beisen, 2005, pp. 50-3).

³ For an overview see Clarens, 1997, pp. 234-58; see also Bernstein, 2002, pp. 61-83.

⁴ Although Le Samouraï is often stated as being based on Joan McLeod's novel, The Ronin, as Vincendeau notes (2003, p. 176), this source cannot be located. She is therefore of the opinion that it should be recognised as an original screenplay by Melville.

⁵ For further discussion of this point see Williams, 1997.

⁶ For an extended discussion of Beattie's story see Goldsmith, 2004.