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Mission: Impossible II

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Mission: Impossible II

Abstract

This is a review of *Mission: Impossible II* (2000).

Assuming you can get past the relentless violence and the equally relentless sexism, *Mission: Impossible II* has a lot to teach about the purpose of violence in action films, particularly in its relation to the ritualistic theme of scapegoating. The film is the latest offering from legendary Hong Kong director John Woo, and it features his trademark: stylish ultra-violence. Choreographed bullets fly by the hundred, glass shatters in graceful cascades, and slow-motion fireballs bloom like chrysanthemums. But behind the aesthetic of mayhem, something very complex is going on: rivalry, scapegoating and male relationships.

The film revolves around a pair of men, one of unmitigated good and one of unmitigated evil. At a superficial level, the film plays out a ritual separation of human sin from human grace in which the two vessels are set before us and one is labeled as all that is greedy, cruel, brutal and ugly: Sean Ambrose (Dougray Scott). The other signifies all that is noble, heroic, and beautiful: Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise). The entire action of the film leads to the moment when the two men square off in single combat, with good sure to triumph over evil and expel it from our midst.

Yet there is something else that's going on here. It is something that comes directly from Woo's Hong Kong "Heroic Bloodshed" films, something that sheds light on the ways that violence animates the type of male relationships that structure a sexist society. Although the two men are supposed to be diametric opposites, they actually share a great deal in common: they work for the same organization, sleep

with the same woman, go to the same places in search of the same secret virus, and (at several points in the film) even share the same face. Although there is a romantic plot (of sorts) between Ethan Hunt and Nyah Nordolf-Hall (Thandie Newton), the film is really about the relationship between Hunt and his rival.

In Woo's Hong Kong films, men's relationships take an unequivocal center-stage. Fables of trust, honor, and friendship are played out amid blood-splattered gunfights. *Mission: Impossible II* leaves most of the gore behind (enough, apparently to earn a PG-13 rating despite the double-digit body count) and puts on a show of heterosexual romance. The essential action, however, is still about the hero and his rival. Ethan and Sean are rivals for Nyah's body, for the secret virus, and eventually for the right to walk away alive. Their very rivalry bonds them, and makes the working-out of their relationship the center of the film and the engine that drives the action. The high stakes of money, bio-terrorism and erotic possession of the only woman in the film are all secondary to the violence that binds two almost perfectly matched men.

This is the paradox at the heart of the film: the men are diametric opposites, but inherently and immutably linked to each other. They fight and die in a homosocial fantasy where women exist only to be shared by rivals and to betray the unwary, where your worst enemy could have been your best friend, and the glowering villain peels off the smiling hero's face. As in the backyard ritual combat

of boys, "good guy" and "bad guy" are just convenient forms into which the same characters can be placed. What's really important is that they are not girls, that they are not sissies, that they are not boring grownups. The result is a great fiction that lies at the heart of *Mission: Impossible II* and at the heart of much "real-world" violence.

The fiction is that there really exists some significant difference between the pure and the impure, between the "good guy" and the "bad guy," between the scapegoated and the scapegoaters. Woo plays with that fiction, casting his hero and villain as polar opposites who have far too much in common for mere coincidence, who desperately desire the same woman, the same virus, the same gun, and who, at the moment of truth, fly through the air into each other's arms as the world explodes around them.

Fulfillment is in violence. Violence is the force which both brings men together and gives them the excuse and the means to deny their intimate connection. In the same way that pornographic films use sex to tell stories of men's power, action films use violence to play out the dynamics of male bonding, exclusion and dominance. As long as societies are structured on men's relationships of power, ritualized, sacred violence will continue to mediate these relationships, and we will see life and films like *Mission: Impossible II*.