

COMMUNICATION 140
INTRODUCTION TO FILM STUDIES

Collateral (2004)

Produced by Michael Mann and Julie Richardson. Directed by Michael Mann. Written by Stuart Beattie. Photographed by Dion Beebe and Paul Cameron. Production Design by David Wasco. Edited by Jim Miller and Paul Rubell. Music by James Newton Howard. With Tom Cruise (Vincent), Jamie Foxx (Max), Jada Pinkett-Smith (Annie), Mark Ruffalo (Fanning), Javier Bardem (Felix).

Collateral begins with a lengthy set up to establish two of the key characters: Max (Jamie Foxx) the taxi driver and Annie (Jada Pinkett-Smith). Seasoned cinema goers will know that this investment must have a payoff, but we don't expect it to take quite so long. That's no bad thing, though, especially in a film which bends and stretches the boundaries of the action thriller genre with such bravura and intelligence.

Getting the audience off balance and out of its comfort zone, writer Stuart Beattie and director Michael Mann [*Heat*, *The Insider*, *Ali*] introduce the assassin Vincent (Tom Cruise) in a novel manner, and continue to keep him on a new, cool leash. This guy is so cool he could reverse global warming. He has a salt and pepper crew cut and a tightly controlled beard. This matches his tightly controlled persona, and he wears a crisp white shirt under an immaculately tailored light grey suit. Wait a minute; he's about to do five hits in a row in downtown Los Angeles ... well, maybe he's ultra neat at his job, to match his clinical and calculating personality. Hmmm.

But the conversations this man has with his taxi driver are probing, gripping, intimate. It's like watching a shrink deconstruct a client. Cabbie and hit man; a bloody buddy movie? How many action thrillers take a detour to Max's hospitalised mum? And with a sense of humour. In fact, at this stage you may think the film is going to lurch into black comedy. Well, it does, but it lurches out again.

Then the film slams into action mode with a body taking the taxi by surprise. This is when Max learns the dangerous truth about his generous fare, Vincent, who has hired him for the entire night shift. Still the style of stainless steel as Vincent continues his deadly round, but now the talk gives way to tension and action.

Superbly shot by Australia's Dion Beebe and Paul Cameron, *Collateral* uses every inventive slick to give us a new angle on the genre - and a new look at Los Angeles. Driven by James Newton Howard's score, the genre elements are balanced by the less conventional aspects. At one stage during the cab ride, Vincent points out to a shocked Max that 10,000 people are killed before sunset in Rwanda yet Max is more upset about a fat crim dying than he is about those innocents. And there's Max's dream of his own limo business, and his fantasy island (photo on sunvisor) to which he escapes every few minutes... these are details that adorn novels, usually, and good films.

Michael Mann-ages to bring this sort of conversation into this high concept Hollywood genre film, thanks of course to Tom Cruise, without losing his audience. But this is a double edged sword for him: in the last reel, Cruise's Vincent becomes a demonic antagonist rampaging through an office tower to kill his final target. His behaviour here is so alien to everything that he's been before, I am tempted to surmise that studio executives persuaded Mann to turn Vincent into yet another nasty villain, all the better to bring out the boo-hiss elements as we count down to the showdown. Until then, he was so cool, so rational, so accurate with his weapons he could shoot a dozen moving targets in a crowded dance club, now he misses at close range. Before, he was so much more in control, and ... intelligent.

We expected more from this screenplay. The film lets itself down in the last reel, and the irony is that this is the only time Vincent's smart grey suit gets bloodied and ripped. A bit. You could write a thesis about all this (and Max nearly does it for us) as the film upends expectations about all its characters.

Much to enjoy and to think about in this ambitious film, more's the pity it's spoilt by a predictable end game that belongs in a lower, more predictable category of filmmaking.

-- Andrew L. Urban, *Urban Cinefile* (Australia)