

Additional Movie Review #1: Die Hard (John McTiernan - Director, 1988)

"*Die Hard* is not a Christmas movie" Bruce Willis declared when it was his turn to take stand behind the lectern at his Comedy Central roast (Miller, 2018). While journalist Mike Miller at Entertainment Weekly chalked his comments up to a curmudgeonly response after an evening of light-hearted abuse, I tend to take the opinion that he has valid point. Christmas is very secondary in the film - there are only a couple of references to it and there is not even so much as a Christmas carol¹, McTiernan instead opting to use The Ode to Joy from Beethoven's 9th Symphony as the predominant musical arrangement.

Die Hard is unusual for this reason and it is for this and other engaging reasons that I have chosen it as the first of the three films to be viewed and reviewed independently, as required by this course. *Die Hard* is not a Christmas movie. It's an action movie. But it still showed up as Forbes' #1 Christmas movie of 2011 (Hughes, 2011) and well as topping Empire's list as recently as last year (O'Hara, 2018). So, the question is: why would a fast-paced, action film be popular Christmas fare? Why is the vague Christmas theme a sufficient excuse for fans to consider this yuletide fodder?

Michael Hann of The Guardian (US Edition) maintains that Christmas is a McGuffin in the movie "a convenient reason for McClane to be travelling across the country" (Hann, 2017). I agree with the convenience suggestion and add that a more pressing reason for using the seasonal holiday is to provide an excuse for a large congregation in order to enable a terrorist hostage situation.

Based on Roderick Thorpe's 1979 novel "Nothing Lasts Forever", *Die Hard* was a breakout performance for Bruce Willis, moving on from his success in the role of David Addison Jr which he had played against Cybill Shepherd since 1985 on the post-modern pseudo-cop show *Moonlighting*², and which had started his career. It would also be the movie that would make Hollywood take notice of British actor Alan Rickman, this being his film debut after successful stage runs in London and on Broadway (Biography, 2016).

Perhaps what gives *Die Hard* its appeal is that it's just good, plain, old-fashioned fun. Good triumphs over evil against overwhelming odds. From the moment we first see the main character, John McClane, it's clear that he's marked as an action heartthrob - there is a momentary glance given by the stewardess as he leaves the plane at the beginning and we know that we're dealing with a James Bond type character only to find out that, not only is he married, but is devoted to his wife, having come across the country to reconcile. And he's not a suave secret agent, either. He's an everyday man; a simple cop and an off-duty cop at that, armed only with a service revolver and faced with increasing challenges and several iterations of the hero's journey.

Here is where the movie differs from others of its class: unlike Harry Callahan in *Dirty Harry* (Don Seigel - Director, 1971) or "Popeye" Doyle in *The French Connection* (William Friedkin - Director, 1971), John McClane is not on the job. He's on family business and has no desire to be caught up in a terrorist situation (Gruber: " Mr. Mystery Guest. Are you still there?" McClane: "Yeah, I'm still here, unless you want to open the door for me") but feels an obligation to, because of the badge, because his wife is in danger and because there's no way out.

Search if you will, there aren't many movies where the focus of the action is a skyscraper. Individual scenes involving high places are not new and date back at least to Harold Lloyd suspended from a clock

¹ In one scene Sgt. Powell is humming *Winter Wonderland*. While seasonal, it's not, technically a Christmas song.

² *Moonlighting* was presented as a quintessential example of post-modernism in a course I took at Macquarie University. Its use of time discontinuity, deliberate anachronisms and shameless breaking of the fourth wall were all, apparently *avant-garde* techniques at the time.

tower in *Safety Last!* (Fred Neymeyer and Sam Taylor - Directors, 1923; a scenario that is, ironically, repeated in the pilot episode of *Moonlighting*) and carries through to such scenes as Bill Murray suspended through a window by a ghostly force in *Scrooged* (Richard Donner - Director, 1988) all the way to Monty Python's satiric attack of The Very Large Corporation of America by *The Crimson Permanent Assurance* where stockbrokers are made to walk the plank from a skyscraper in the short film which precedes their cinematic swan song, *Monty Python's Meaning of Life* (Terry Jones and Terry Gilliam - Directors, 1983) and appears briefly in the actual film.

But a movie wherein the building itself is the main stage and concern is rare. More recently, there is Dwayne Johnson in *Skyscraper* (Rawson Marshall Thurber - Director, 2018) and Pete Travis's dystopian depiction *Dredd* (2012), a film adaptation of the cult character from 2000 A.D comics and a similar scenario to *Die Hard*; a cop trapped in a tall building alone (although Joseph Dredd has a partner), up against a massive crime syndicate. The other skyscraper drama that will crop up in a Google search is the 1974 John Guillermin epic *The Towering Inferno*. Like *Die Hard*, it presents a scenario in which partygoers are threatened by an unforeseen and dangerous circumstance and their safety is of paramount concern.

Any disappointment that McClane is a regular joe and not James Bond is rapidly dissipated by Alan Rickman's portrayal of Hans Gruber who is sort of an anti-Bond. Like Bond he shows that he is a man of taste (to Takagi: "Nice suit. John Philips...London? I have two myself), he boasts a classical education and speaks with a flawless British accent even though he originates from West Germany, which would suggest a foreign education at Oxford or Cambridge. When confronted by McClane after checking the explosives, he proves his resourcefulness in a manner reminiscent of Bond, by impersonating one of the hostages. Alan Rickman, of course, is now perhaps best known for his portrayal of J.K. Rowling's Severus Snape in the Harry Potter movies, a role he likewise executed with the skill of a graduate of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and the Royal Shakespeare Theatre Company.

The truth is, despite being a cold-blooded killer Hans Gruber is just a likeable character. He has a dry and acerbic wit and displays a calculated calmness that is almost soothing. The ease and complacency with which he handles the police and the FBI and how he casually and calmly takes Holly as a human shield before the final confrontation between himself and McClane shows that he exudes confidence and confidence is attractive (Murphy, 2015). No one expected him to kill Takagi - probably not even Takagi, himself; his last words seemed to imply as much ("[laughing] You're just going to have to kill me"). It is Gruber's calm demeanour which makes it all the more shocking when he pulls the trigger.

Similarly, one finds oneself almost sympathetic towards Theo, the hired hacker, charged with accessing the vault - the main focus of the operation; the hostage situation being a smokescreen (Gruber: "By the time they figure out what went wrong we'll be sitting on a beach earning twenty percent"). Theo doesn't seem particularly threatening, but he doesn't flinch when Karl kills the security guard when they first enter the building nor when Gruber kills Takagi. Because he's a comic we are apt to forgive this (even though, "You didn't bring me along for my charming personality"). Thus, it comes as no surprise that Gruber and Theo, the two most likeable villains, are the two focal characters present when the vault opens. Similar to the guilty confusion caused by Slim Pickens frantic quest to open the bomb bay doors in *Dr Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (Stanley Kubrick - Director, 1964) one finds oneself unintentionally rooting for the undesirable consequence. With the triumphant fanfare of Beethoven's Ode to Joy (it's second appearance - the first time was as quiet cocktail music when Gruber and his men first entered the party) and Theo victoriously throwing open the vault boxes, one feels a sense of joyful victory that one must snap out of. Interestingly, of all the perpetrators, Theo is the only one to survive; all the others are killed.

Also present is the bad, bad guy. That would be Karl. Alexander Godunov is an atrocious actor so luckily, he was given an easy part to play. Karl is a vengeful hothead which we see early in the film when, despite the protests of his brother (spoken in German as a plot device to introduce us to the concept that they *are* German) he cuts the phone lines almost prematurely. When his brother shows up dead (with "ho ho ho"

written on his chest - one of the few Christmas references) he seeks revenge against McClane, completely oblivious to the pain that he would have caused to the family of the security guard or Takagi. He is self-centered and self-absorbed and most of his scenes are in anger which is the easiest emotion for an actor to convey (Williams, 2019). It is a sharp contrast from his deplorable performance as concert maestro Max Beissart in *The Money Pit* (Richard Benjamin - Director, 1986) where he plays opposite accomplished actor Tom Hanks, thus accentuating his poor talent.

If McClane is a "good, good guy" and Theo is a "good, bad guy" and Karl is a "bad, bad guy" then Richard Thornburg, the TV reporter, Harry Ellis, Holly's V.P. of Sales, and Deputy Police Chief Dwayne T. Robinson are all "bad, good guys". Bad, good guys aren't bad because they're malicious like bad, bad guys. They are either incompetent, greedy or cocky or some combination of the three.

We expect Paul Gleason's Dwayne Robinson to be a jerk because his Clarence Beeks in *Trading Places* (John Landis - Director, 1983) and Richard Vernon in *The Breakfast Club* (John Hughes - Director, 1985) were both jerks. Both he and William Atherton (Thornburg) lend themselves to type casting in this fashion. But Dwayne Robinson is also a vehicle to reinforce the concept of the ineptitude of bureaucracy. He thinks he knows what is going on but doesn't (McClane: "from up here, it doesn't look like you're in charge of jack...") and only serves to get in the way of those who do ("quit being part of the problem and put the other guy back on"). We hope for his comeuppance and cheer when it happens (his authority gets shot down by the FBI, but that only shifts the incompetence to a higher level). He's a bad guy because he's incompetent not because he's malicious. As I mentioned, John McClane is a regular joe, so he appeals to regular joes and regular joes like to see their pompous bosses get their just desserts. The guy on the assembly line knows the product better than the executives in the offices so when McClane warns the police against a direct assault and is proven correct, every blue-collar viewer in the audience groans in sympathy.

Similarly, Thornburg is a bad guy because he's greedy and ambitious rather than malicious. He's an obsessive TV reporter - an archetypical yellow journalist zealously hunting a story who is oblivious to any harm he may cause. We see his bad side when he threatens Holly's maid with the INS (the camera close in to bring us into his confidence, ironically after he has shewed away his own camera crew) and we have expectations of the kind of character he is, not only from his boastful attitude when he is introduced (he is claiming to be personal friends with "Wolfgang" - presumably a chef or a Maître d'hôtel of some exclusive establishment) but also because we've seen the same actor play a similar character; as Walter Peck in *Ghostbusters* (Ivan Reitman - Director, 1984). Again, we all cheer at his demise whether it be because he was punched in the nose by Holly (one of the better Hollywood punches; the dull thud makes my eyes water every time) or being drenched in goo from an exploding oversized marshmallow mascot effigy.

We see what kind of person Harry Ellis is early in the film and he's also the kind of guy blue collar workers love to hate. He is a smarmy, cocksure salesman with little or no moral standards as demonstrated when he shamelessly hits on Holly at the beginning of the party, knowing full well that she is a married woman; or when he betrays McClane by passing his identity on to Gruber. His demise isn't as satisfying as Robinson's or Thornburg's; he serves more as a warning of what overconfidence can do.

The Hero Cycle usually involves the hero receiving some sort of assistance in his or her quest. *Die Hard* is no exception. There are two distinct phases in the movie divided by Sergeant Powell's introduction and involvement. Prior to that moment McClane is alone, with only a pistol, forced to fight primarily by stealth and guile. As one of the first scenes we are introduced to Argyle, the chauffeur who drove McClane to Nakatomi Plaza and we expect him to be one of McClane's helpers, but this doesn't turn out to be the case. While he tells McClane that he will be there waiting for him (and, indeed, does pick him and Holly

up at the end of the movie) he has little or no impact on the proceedings of the plot line other than to be present to subdue Theo in the parking garage.

But when Powell is introduced the mood of the film distinctively shifts - although Powell is limited in his capacity to assist, at least McClane is no longer alone. Powell was the first of the "good guys" to arrive on the scene and was with McClane throughout the ordeal. Despite his involvement, however, he has no influence on what McClane faces. He is simply there to keep McClane going. But that's enough. Through the dialog between the two we see more depth in both characters.

Height and the threat of falling to one's death is one central theme, obviously because of the setting but glass and breaking glass is another recurring theme, presumably because skyscrapers tend to liberally use the material. McClane breaks the window in order to throw Heinrich's body onto Powell's car to attract his attention. The body subsequently shatters the windshield of Powell's car. Gruber orders Karl to shoot the glass, knowing that McClane is barefoot and later, a barefooted McClane must shoot the window to regain entry to the building after bungee jumping from the exploding roof using a firehose. Robinson complained that his men were covered in glass after McClane dropped the explosives down the elevator shaft and we see McClane picking shards of glass from his feet after Karl follows Gruber's order.

In order for a movie to maintain suspense the hero can't be invincible - even Superman had kryptonite. There must be a danger that the hero won't succeed or, worse, won't survive, as is suggested at the end of Thorpe's original book and, according to Willis, an inspiration for how he played the climatic showdown between McClane and Gruber. For this reason, the hero must be handicapped, either with a susceptibility to kryptonite or bare feet. The man on the plane (scripted only as "Salesman") exists for one reason only: to advise McClane to unwind from the flight by taking off his shoes and socks and to "walk around on the rug barefoot and make fists with your toes." Why? So that McClane would be caught barefoot, thus making his plight more dramatic.

Die Hard is not a cinematic masterpiece; it was winner of few nominations and even fewer wins in mostly foreign awards. But it's a fast-paced action film that has a relatability for the common man; John McClane is hero to Andy Samberg's Jake Peralta in the TV series *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (2013-), an everyday cop who can't pay his rent but dreams of being caught in a *Die Hard* type situation, eventually realizing the dream in Season 3. McClane is a modern cowboy; the parallel not lost to the writers. He's partial to Roy Rogers ("I really dug those sequined shirts") and knows that it was Gary Cooper, not John Wayne, who rode off with Grace Kelly in *High Noon* (Fred Zinnemann - Director, 1952 - the movie, however, is not directly referenced). Again, like a cowboy, McClane is a loner.

In conclusion, no, *Die Hard* is not a Christmas movie but what it offers is better than a lot of other Christmas fare.

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