

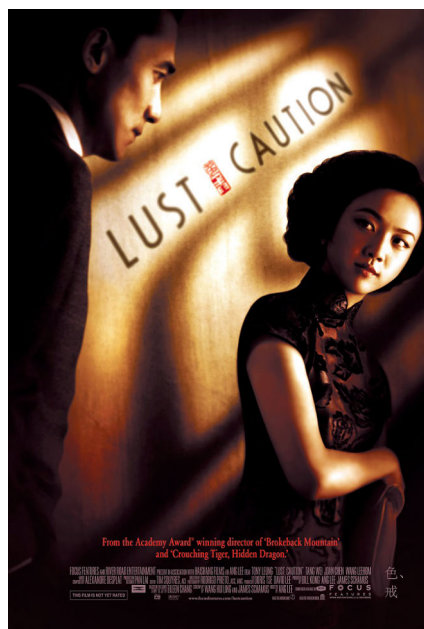
Lust, Caution (色, 戒, Sè, Jiè, 2007)

Ioana Uricaru

dir. Ang Lee; prod. Ang Lee, William Kong, David Lee, Doris Tse; screenplay James Schamus, Hui-Ling Wan; photography Rodrigo Prieto; music Alexandre Desplat. 35mm, color, 157 mins. Haishang Films, distrib. Focus Features.

Lust, Caution captured international attention for various reasons: It won a Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, it received an NC-17 rating in the United States for its explicit sex scenes, and its female star, Tang Wei, was ostracized and black-listed in China because of her participation in said sex scenes. Based on a novella by Eileen Chiang—which, in turn, was inspired by the life of Chinese spy Zheng Pinru—the film's plot is set in the late 1930s and early 40s during the Second Sino-Japanese War. The protagonist, Wong Chia Chi (played by Tang Wei), a young, innocent student at Hong Kong's Lignan University, becomes part of a drama group that becomes a gateway to the student patriotic movement, determined to resist Japanese occupation. Their leader, Kuang Yu Min (played by Leehom Wang), recruits Wong Chia Chi, as both an actress and a resistance fighter. She develops from a shy, unassuming girl, into an irresistible »seductress,« whose mission is to trap Mr. Yee (played by Tony Chiu-Wai Leung), an important official of the collaborationist puppet government, and to lure him into an assassination plot. Wong Chia Chi executes her mission impeccably, managing to find the vulnerable spot of the sadistic, impenetrable Yee through their intense erotic experiences. At the very last moment, however, she decides to warn Yee of his immediate danger, and he then saves himself while sending Wong Chia Chi and all her comrades to execution.

The emotional intensity of this doomed love story, the visual richness of a lavish period reconstruction, the vast contribution of score and source music (including a song performance by Wong Chia Chi that makes her hardened male listener break down and cry), and the overwhelming range of emotions of the film's female protagonist,



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some expressed through sexual acts, all seem to classify *Lust, Caution* as a melodrama in the generally accepted use of the term. More recently, however, Linda Williams has proposed a different take on the conceptualization of the genre. She defines melodrama as a genre expressing an a priori acceptance of the (moral) dichotomy of good and bad. In melodrama, according to Williams, the genre conventions are not shaped by the imperative of an overt, sometimes overwhelming, display of exaggerated sentiment, convoluted conflicts, extreme character traits, and the whole battery of emotion-inducing techniques—what is commonly known as melodramatic excess. This excess is nothing but a means to an end: a proven, effective methodology for involving an audience in the story of good versus evil, which fight and attempt to vanquish each other. The protagonists fight the antagonists, as well as a host of other obstacles (from societal forces to historical circumstances to personal or family prejudice to bad luck), while attempting to help the good side win. The conventions of the genre are tools employed to generate the audience's empathy to fight for a good cause, in the most effective way possible, which often means in a visceral way.

The foundational myth of melodrama could be defined, therefore, as the belief in the existence of a good that is opposed to evil, complemented by the protagonist's ability to choose this good and act in its support. From this perspective, Ang Lee's film presents a daring take on the genre. While the protagonist's struggle fits the melodramatic conventions as understood by Williams, Wong Chia Chi's final decision reiterates an even deeper, fundamental element of melodrama: the paramount importance of personal choice and ineffable subjective experience. She joins the righteous struggle against occupation, and gives it her all, but, as the story develops, we become less certain of the distinction between »good« and »bad.« Mr. Yee, established as the villain of the story—who betrays his people, collaborates with the enemy, and tortures prisoners with his own hands—seems to be the only man in her life who does not use, lie to, or abandon her. Her father left to remarry and moved overseas with no concern for his daughter's safety; Kuang Yu Min, who recruited Wong Cha Chi, never musters the courage to express his feelings for her; the revolutionary commanders treat her like a tool to achieve political goals. The emotionally stunted, morally deficient Yee is the only one who apparently cares for Wong Cha Chi, even if in a simplistic way—tending to her needs and desires, from sexual hunger to longings for exquisite jewelry. Tony Chiu-Wai Leung's extraordinary performance creates a Yee that is deeply convincing, both as a monster and a lost soul, and when Wong Cha Chi saves his life at the cost of destroying everybody else, including herself, we understand why. He allowed himself to become truly vulnerable to her, and she is so moved, so touched, so aware of the precious unlikeliness of this vulnerability, she must reward it by protecting him. At first glance, it might look like the woman becomes guilty herself of betrayal and murder for the sake of a diamond ring and a man's attention. However, the central point of the story and film, the way it is constructed and the way it unfolds, the overall use of the melodramatic toolkit, is a wager made with the audience. Ang Lee's goal is to present a bold twist on genre conventions, counteracting the good/evil structure as theorized by Williams with the idea that »good« and »evil« are categories that individuals could, in circumstances of heightened emotions and intense human connection, re-create according to their deepest instincts. This Taiwanese melodrama can therefore be most closely related, thematically, to Pedro Almodóvar's stories of *amour fou* (in, e.g. *Matador*,

Law of Desire, and *Talk to Her*), where morality is transcended through a mad act of absolute love, sealed by sacrifice.

Betrayed by those who were supposed to love her, and used by those who claim higher ideals, Wong Chia Chi chooses to save the one man who has recognized her as an authentic human being, even as she tried to fool him, and to sacrifice herself for him. Hers is a powerful decision with catastrophic consequences, and, while Yee is not redeemed (still sending Wong Chia Chi and her comrades to death), what the protagonist accomplishes is a validation of *her* feelings, *her* agency, *her* power—and ultimately the meaning of *her* existence. Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution* is not only a story about the struggle between good and evil but about passion redefining right and wrong.

Reference

Williams, Linda. 2014. *On The Wire*. Durham: Duke University Press.

