Infernal Affairs (2002)
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Infernal Affairs is the first of the 3 movie series based on life of undercover detective Yan. It was released on 10 December 2002 in Hong Kong and is directed by Andrew Lau and Alan Mark. It stars Andy Lau, Tony Leung, Anthony Wong, Eric Tsang as lead cast and Kelly Chen, Sammi Cheng in the supporting roles. It has a running time of 101 minutes and was originally made in Cantonese. It is a widely acclaimed film winning many awards in the Hong Kong and a success in Hong Kong box office. It was remade in 2006 by Martin Scorsese into ‘The Departed’ which went on to win the Academy Award for Best Picture. There exist few alternate endings made for this movie as shown in mainland China.

**GENRE**

‘Crime-psychological-thriller’ is the genre I would assign to the movie, it has all the traditional elements of crime movie from over-zealous mobster to undercover agents and dirty cops and with the swift and precise storytelling style and intense scenes. But what makes it special is the psychological element, the state of minds of the characters in the movie and the dilemma of being a mole has generated a cult following of its own. We also see the hierarchical system prevailing in the triad society of China, the brotherhood among mobster which is mixed along with the hide and seek of a spy, sense of losing one’s identity in the whirling world of lies.

**HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

Infernal Affairs is sometimes referred as to the revival of Hong Kong movie industry which was seen as lacking creativity. Other aspects of the movie also reflect upon the Hong Kong culture. This is definite crisis of identity among the characters which is feeling endorsed in the populace suffered due to the colonization of Hong Kong. As the people cannot go back their original identity before the opium-wars similarly the undercover agents feel a distance from their original selves. The is also a history of undercover agents in Hong Kong started by the British, there were many inhabitants who embraced the British as their new master and conspired against their homeland. This has also added to the identity crisis experienced in the movie, we see in the Inspector Lau who in the ends wants to be the ‘good guy’ forgetting his past.

We can see an interesting point in the triad culture shown in the movie. The triad were on a decline since the emergence of British Hong Kong and in the 21st century have been limited to extortion, trafficking and money laundering. We can see a deep relation between the triad and police where many triad members are undercover police agents and likewise many police agents are on payroll of triad bosses, which raises the question who is a triad and who is a cop.

**DIRECTOR’S PROFILE**

Andrew Lau (1960 - ) started his career as cinematographer and in 1990’s expanded to directing. He has made films in variety of genres but is known for his action and crime movies especially Young and Dangerous Series which glorified the triad culture and the Infernal Affairs series.

Alan Mak (1968 - ) started his directorial career in 1990 upon graduating from the Hong Kong Academy for Performance Arts. He came into the limelight with the Infernal Affairs series. He subsequently made more movies with Lau, ‘Initial D’ in 2004 was also a success both at box office and with critics.

**SYNOPSIS**

The story focuses police officer Chan Wing-yan who goes undercover into a triad and a triad member Lau Kin-ming who infiltrates the police force. Hon Sam, a triad boss sends many young gangster to police academy as moles. While it seems that young Chan is expelled from police academy, in reality Chan has become an undercover agent reporting only to Wong. Over the course of ten years, Chan experiences great stress from
his undercover work while Lau quickly rises through the ranks in the police department. The film begins with a meeting between Chan and Lau in a hi-fi store without either of them knowing the other's identity.

Wong and his team interrupt a deal between Hon Sam and a Thai cocaine dealer after receiving a tip-off from Chan using Morse code. However, Lau alerts Hon, giving him enough time to order his minions to dispose of the cocaine, eliminating solid evidence of the drug deal. After the incident, Wong and Hon are both aware that they each have a mole within their respective organizations. Later, Chan sees Hon conversing with Lau at a cinema but does not see Lau's face clearly; he ultimately fails to capture Lau. By this time, both Chan and Lau are struggling with their double identities – Chan starts losing faith in himself as a cop after being a gangster for ten years; Lau becomes more accustomed to the life of a police officer and he wants to erase his criminal background. At their next meeting, Wong intends to pull Chan out of undercover work for fear of his safety. However they were tracked by CIB and Lau tells Sam. Sam send his men to kill the mole, while Chan escapes Wong is killed by the gangster. A shootout ensues following which we see keung as undercover agent. Lau contacts Chan and based on intelligence from chan arrest Hon’s men in a drug deal and Lau kills Sam. Chan while meeting with Lau discovers he is the mole and runs away. He sends disc containing evidence to Lau’s wife and sends his file to his love interest Dr. Lee.

Chan and Lau meet on the same rooftop where Wong was killed earlier. Chan disarms Lau but is intercepted by Inspector B who shoots Chan and tells Lau he is also a mole. But Lau kills B framing him as the mole in OCTB. In the funeral of Chan it is known he was an undercover cop and in a flashback Lau wishes he has taken a different path.

SPECIAL OBSERVATIONS

The emphasis of the whole movie is the on the multi-faceted relationship between the characters and the fact that many of use lead a double-life becoming someone else to achieve our ends. But wearing a mask for long enough it becomes a part of your skin and you can’t take it off but it results in an itch which won’t let you live in peace. For the ten years Chan has living a life of a gangster, all the people in his life know him as a gangster, even the psychiatrist Dr. Lee refuses to believe him about his true identity. But for Lau things are even more complex since he has become unsure who he really his, his past associated with Sam binds him to being a crook but he has come to love his respectable life as a policeman where he prospers professionally and has a good marriage. He is afraid to lose all this and wants to turn a clean slate.

Both the leads though mirror images of each other wear skins which are polar opposites of their original selves. Each envies the other’s life, while Chan wants a true respectable life while Lau wants to be a real policeman, he is unsure of himself and much of his success as a policeman is because of Sam feeding him information. He repeatedly says in the movie that ‘I am a cop’ as to prove to himself who he is. In the sequel of this movie this identity crises even stronger than in this movie. Throughout the movie he is shown as very calm and adept at his work. It is only in the end when another mole of Sami in the police force is exposed that he realizes his nakedness and like any cornered beast lashes out. We do not see this confusion with Chan who is sure of his identity till his end. Even when made accomplice to the various crimes he does not lose sight of his goal. It is this image of his true self that is shown to be breaking down in the movie unable to continue as a gangster.

It is evident that this split personality of Lau has been noticed by other people as well, his fiancée is writing a novel of multiple personality which she intuitively bases on Lau never recognizing how correct she is. In the end when she finds out about his past says she can’t decide whether her character is good or bad showing her conflict over her husband being a mole in police department.

An important sequence in the whole movie is when both sides get notice of opposition’s moles in their midst. The live action packed drug bust in the starting of film shows the how good the characters are at their jobs. They are able to perform their cover jobs and simultaneously act undercover as well, all this with cool and calm faces. One other point to note is the absence of violence in the movie until the ending sequences which is in contrast to usual Hong Kong Crime movies. Even without gunfights, high paced car chases and exploding
buildings there is a strong fluidity in the movie, every dialogue is action packed because of fear of the people giving away their cover which leaves the audience hugging themselves with excitement. This tension is evident throughout the movie when yeung, another gangster jokingly says to Yan that ‘you are a cop’ he almost freezes.

Meaning of the title ‘Infernal Affairs’ is also quite interesting, its literal meaning is ‘No Way Out’ or in directors words ‘The Never Ending Path’. This is a reference to the eight hell of Buddhism, the hell of continuous suffering. This being again an indirect reference to the hellish life a mole leads and a life that will never end. There is also a notation of loyalty and brotherhood we see among both police and the mob. When Yan goes for a massage his fellow gangster says he won’t tell on the him and after SP wong deaths we see that a lot of police despise Lau who was initially very much admired. This discontent is because of his tailing of SP Wong and which seems like a betrayal to his brethren. Also a notable feature is saying ‘Sorry’, ‘Ok’, ‘Good’ and other words in English which may represent the impact of British colonization in the working populace of Hong Kong.

The movie is quite picturesque in presenting the modern day offices of Hong Kong and the crowded streets. Many scenes contain hidden allegory to the inner turmoil of the moles. We see that most of the meetings of Yan and SP Wong occur at rooftop where we receive a sense of freedom and expanse, it is here that Yan is truly able to show is real self and voice out his true thoughts. Whereas Lau is many a times shown in confined surroundings alone, maybe depicting his life in which he has no true friends and has no space for the true himself. In one shot Yan is shown in parallel to the mountain symbolizing maybe his strength and character is that of a mountain.

CONCLUSION

Infernal Affairs is a gripping thriller with grandstanding drama, muscle-clenching suspense and two great action leads in Tony Leung and Andy Lau. The plot is so condensed and fast paced that even few moments of distraction is not allowed. Using various cinematographic elements the directors have successfully a movie which shows that dark and makeshift world of organized crime and police. The boundaries between the two sides is highly blurred. And the walking to the opposite leads to a person to the path of continuous suffering.