

Cultural Daily

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Lu Chuan: City of Life and Death

Adam Leipzig · Saturday, June 25th, 2011

This purpose of a war film is not to entertain, but neither is it to exploit. All great war films are anti-war films, because they reveal the intrinsic value of human life in a way no other genre can. This is case with Lu Chuan's *City of Life and Death*, which is one of the best war films ever made. It's the kind of film people don't flock to see, because it seems off-putting, and there is no good way to "sell" it except that it is a film a singular quality and leaves you feeling... feeling alive, feeling harrowed, feeling a strange and subtle hopefulness, feeling profound respect for the artists who have created this masterpiece.

A vivid and brutal account of the Chinese occupation Nanking, *City of Life and Death* is, finally, a remarkable meditation on the randomness of life and death, the human power to survive, and how people are capable of cruelty as well as compassion and salvation.

Lu Chuan, one of China's youngest and most important filmmakers, whose third feature this is, has shot the picture, wisely, in black and white, in wide-screen format. This will immediately bring *Schindler's List* to mind, which is appropriate but insufficient. *City of Life and Death* also recalls *Paths of Glory* and *Jeux Interdits*, other black and white movies that show how war affects us.

The film is intense, realistic and graphic, but never exploitative. There are many images of death, unrelenting at times, but Chuan prefers to focus on the human dimension: he shows us a man's sobs as a child is hurled from a window, rather than showing the child's fall.

Kino is distributing and there are only a few prints, which are cycling around calendar houses in the US for the next several months. [Here's](#) information on where the film is playing. For our Los Angeles readers, it is at the Pasadena Laemmle this week. It's also worth a drive to wherever you can see it. I've seen it five times, and each time I admire its power, beauty and excellence.

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