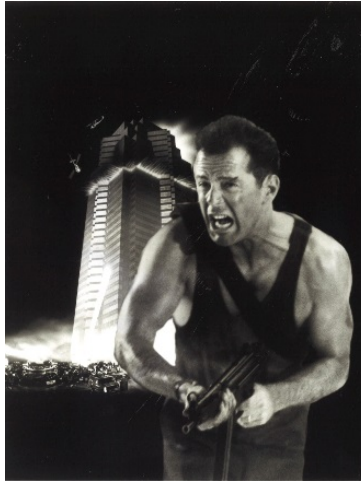**Die Hard**
by Eric Lichtenfeld

*(Image courtesy, Library of Congress Motion Picture,
Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division)*

"This is something else."

What debonair terrorist Hans Gruber (Alan Rickman) recognizes about New York City detective John McClane (Bruce Willis) upon first seeing his handiwork is very much what the moviegoing public, and 20th Century Fox executives, recognized about the film that brought them together. Although "Die Hard," directed by John McTiernan for producers Lawrence Gordon and Joel Silver, has much in common with other action pictures of the 1980s, it also stands apart, a film that was culturally perceptive and cinematically daring when made, and that has retained its resonance and the uniqueness of its style over time.

By July 1988, when "Die Hard" was released, the American action film had become its own distinct form. With "Dirty Harry" (1971), elements of the Western, film noir, the police procedural, and the horror movie began colliding to create this emerging genre, but it took the eighties for the formula to cohere.

During that decade, the Hollywood action movie also organized itself around a particular facet of the political and cultural zeitgeist: a sense of renewed American might and moral clarity that was embodied in everything from Ronald Reagan's "Evil Empire" and "Morning in America" narratives to the public's embrace of military camouflage as a fashion trend. Still, while the genre drew from these deep pools of film history and cultural wish fulfillment, the movies themselves were often simplistic, even brutish. It was against this backdrop that "Die Hard" cut its unlikely silhouette.

The film begins with McClane arriving in Los Angeles to visit his estranged wife Holly (Bonnie Bedelia) and their children on Christmas Eve. McClane meets Holly at Nakatomi Plaza, a corporate high-rise where her company is holding its holiday party thirty floors above the city. Their reunion is interrupted when the building—and the partygoers—are seized by twelve terrorists led by Hans. With a 9 mm Beretta and no shoes, McClane escapes to the higher floors—and through the tower's shafts and ductwork—where he fights a guerrilla-style war to save the hostages. Though ultimately caught between the terrorists and the agendas

of the LAPD, the FBI, and a craven news media, McClane still proves disruptive to the villains' Christmas Eve plans: breaking into Nakatomi's seemingly impenetrable vault, and stealing the $640 million in bonds contained inside.

Of course, rehashing the plot is hardly necessary, so established is the film's place in the national and even international imagination. (In a glib moment from the "Die Hard" franchise's third entry, one character refers to the events of the first simply as "that thing in the building in L.A.") In addition to earning four Academy Award nominations and launching one of Fox's cornerstone properties, the picture inspired so many imitators that its format became the most recognizable trend in action filmmaking for almost a decade. It may also be the bloodiest movie ever to enter the pantheon of Christmas classics.

This legacy is more than Fox executives could have hoped for before the film premiered. With Willis unproven as a movie star, but the movie proving itself with test audiences, Fox gave "Die Hard" a platform release, opening it on just 21 screens and allowing word of mouth to support its expansion to nearly 1,300 by the following weekend and to over 1,700 at its peak—an almost unthinkable, but in this case highly successful, strategy for a summertime action extravaganza.

The film's production history has been documented elsewhere, in accounts that detail Jeb Stuart and Steven E. de Souza's process of adapting Roderick Thorp's novel "Nothing Lasts Forever," McTiernan's idea of replacing the book's dour terrorist plot with a more zestful caper, the early casting of Rickman in the role that made him a film actor, the late casting of Willis in the role that made him a movie star, and the casting of the film's most monumental player: the studio's own Fox Plaza, located on the corner of the studio lot, which assumed the role of the Nakatomi building both inside and out.

But perhaps the aspect of the film most widely remarked upon is the everyman quality of Willis's John McClane. And for good reason. Willis's vulnerability and more average physique instantly made him a counterpoint to the chiseled automatons played by Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone, action heroes more typical of the era. Willis and the filmmakers made McClane even more relatable to audiences by imbuing the character with a strong working-class persona. This emerges in stark relief next to the high culture embodied by Hans and the corporate culture embodied by the Nakatomi executives and the building itself.

"Die Hard" also makes McClane a relatable and—even more—distinctly American hero by how it invokes popular culture. "But who are you?" Hans asks, "Just another American who saw too many movies as a child? Another orphan of a bankrupt culture who thinks he's John Wayne? Rambo? Marshal Dillon?" McClane answers with a glib reference to Roy Rogers, and finally, with the phrase that would become one of the most iconic one-liners in a genre known for one-liners: "Yippee-kai-yay, motherfucker," a meeting of old-time Western cheer and raised-middle-finger defiance.

Of course, "Die Hard" is not the only movie to reference other movies. In fact, the next several years would see a spate of wry, self-aware action pictures, including McTiernan's own "Last Action Hero." But the approach "Die Hard" takes is ultimately rooted less in irony than in sincerity. In their first exchange, LAPD sergeant Al Powell (Reginald VelJohnson) asks McClane how he should be identified. McClane's response may not be one of the film's most memorable lines, but it makes for one of its most resonant moments: "Call me . . . Roy," he says.

On the surface, McClane's reply may seem like a mere grace note, but it stands for something more. Trapped in what would surely count among the darkest, most precarious situations of his life, McClane aligns himself with one of

the legendary, if also more lighthearted, Western figures of his boyhood, and by extension, to a tradition larger and more permanent than himself: the closest thing America has to a mythology of its own.

This marks a break from the kind of postmodernism so typical of genre filmmaking. Rather than cool detachment, it is an authentic embrace. It also brings into focus the fact that, as the story progresses, and for all of his wisecracks (which Willis delivers with comic timing honed by his contemporaneous work on television's "Moonlighting"), McClane actually loses his cynicism. In fact, what sets him apart from the power structures he is caught among—the terrorists, the media, the FBI, the LAPD, and certain elements of the Nakatomi Corporation—is that McClane is engaged deeply. And to stay engaged in what is happening to him, he draws strength from what came before him.

The way "Die Hard" questions and affirms our popular culture's worth, in these scenes, as well as in Hans and McClane's final showdown (which references that of "High Noon") makes for a subtle variation on the redemption fantasies peddled by action movies of the time. It speaks more to the audience's lived experience than does the overly mythic and jingoistic output of Chuck Norris, Sylvester Stallone, and others.

Still, this aspect of the movie is given sharper definition by the environment: Nakatomi Plaza. While far removed from the xenophobia of other eighties action films, the conversion of the novel's American oil company headquarters to the outpost of a Japanese multinational corporation tapped a particular vein of cultural and racial anxiety. Through the latter half of the 1980s, with Japan's economy thriving and America's wobbling toward recession, Japanese companies took over a slew of established American brands, businesses, real estate holdings, and landmarks, from famed golf courses and the Tiffany building to the

Firestone Tire & Rubber Company, and perhaps the most iconic of this trend, Rockefeller Center.

This phenomenon of Japanese acquisition of American interests—despite never eclipsing the investments held by the British or the Dutch—provoked a deep unease throughout the country. In fact, a September 1987 issue of BusinessWeek illustrated this with an image of a samurai swordsman holding in his grip the facade of the New York Stock Exchange, while later coverage focused on how this economic incursion was creeping into the realm of political and psychological influence. The latter was featured as the cover story of the issue dated July 11, 1988. The world premiere of "Die Hard" was held on July 12.

The movie enters the cultural conversation about this issue largely through its art direction. For the Nakatomi Corporation's North American headquarters, production designer Jackson De Govia used (or simulated) organic building materials favored by Japanese architecture, and a corporate logo he designed to suggest the helmet and shoulder plates of samurai armor. But the movie makes the most pointed reference to the angst over the Japanese acquisition of American assets through one of De Govia's subtlest, and yet most audacious, contributions: the waterfall seen on the Nakatomi building's thirtieth floor.

The structure is taken from Fallingwater, a creation of the preeminent American architect Frank Lloyd Wright. De Govia imagined that the Nakatomi Corporation had become so arrogant that it bought this architectural landmark and relocated it to an indoor atrium thirty floors above the city, where the company could enjoy it exclusively. The concept was approved by producer Joel Silver—whom De Govia knew to be passionate about Wright—and Fallingwater became the centerpiece of the one main set built for "Die Hard" on a soundstage.

The skill of the art department was matched by that of the other production and post-production units, all under McTiernan's direction. Jan De Bont's cinematography lends "Die Hard" a more sophisticated style than is commonly seen in action movies of the time. This style was informed by film noir and energized by a fluidly moving camera and an embrace of lens flares that broke with what was then accepted practice for cinematography.

McTiernan also challenged aesthetic norms by enlisting editors Frank Urioste and John F. Link to edit together shots mid-motion, a stylistic choice reflecting how McTiernan was influenced by the French New Wave. It may seem like a mere quirk today, but this editorial style was so unusual for mainstream movies of the time that McTiernan worried that Fox executives would fire him from the film that, in the end, would mark a highlight of his career and a turning point for the genre. As for Urioste and Link, they would be rewarded for their efforts with a shared Academy Award nomination.

Even Michael Kamen's music, while not violating established formal principles per se, also subverts convention and imparts to "Die Hard" a sense of mischief. Most prominently, Kamen assigned the score's main theme—"Ode to Joy," the final movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony—not to the hero, but to the villains. (The theme is given its fullest expression when the terrorists finally breach the vault.) The score also cites "Winter Wonderland" and "Singin' in the Rain," heard, among other incongruous moments, when a terrorist razes Powell's car with machine gun fire and when two others blow up a police assault vehicle on the building's front steps.

This peculiar glee is of a piece with what McTiernan was trying to craft: an action movie that is not simply escapist, as so many of its contemporaries were, but one that, even with all the explosions and gunplay and tension and gore, is distinctly joyful. Because of his success, and the success of all the filmmakers in creating such a keenly textured film, "Die Hard" remains a landmark in American popular culture. It is the rare movie to capture its moment without being bound by it. And for a story so confined— a single building, a single night—it offers a whole vista's worth of reflections on the American character.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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