

JCVD: The Answer Before the Question

JCVD is the third feature length film by French director Mabrouk El Mechri, but is well down the list of productions that have starred Jean Claude Van Damme. Van Damme's real life is woven into this fictional story. He was born and raised in Belgium. With early training in karate and dance, he began competing in martial arts, gaining international attention by his twenties. In 1982 he and a friend moved to Hollywood and in 1988, after a few small roles, he starred as the hero in an action film the first time. He has been married five times, with three children from two of these unions. He did fight a custody battle for a son, signing divorce papers which also contained statements about spousal abuse and drug addiction. Fans of Van Damme very much credit him with bringing director John Woo to Hollywood. Woo had directed action films out of Hong Kong since the early 70s; his first American production was *Hard Target* with Van Damme, and there was a belief that this would be the first in a series of collaborations that would take both men into the a-list sphere in Hollywood. John Woo went on to make numerous blockbuster movies while Van Damme never managed the recognition for which his fans had hoped, often considered by fans as Woo's betrayal of Van Damme.

In my deeper analysis of this film, *JCVD*, I have been drawn to the phrase: "The answer before the question". It is a phrase repeated in this film several times and is the title to the first act, but the answer and question are never explicitly stated. It is my hope that this paper can credibly begin to fill in the blanks behind this phrase and provide a plausible theory of how this is a film about transformation – of a character, of an actor, and possibly even of us, the viewer.

In psychoanalysis the question might be "What becomes of the child who has faced particular struggles and conflicts and difficult relationships?". In the consulting room, first meeting with the patient, we have a sense of the answer in the symptoms, thoughts and dreams presented, but it takes the process of the analysis to truly appreciate the question. In fact, only in actually understanding the subtleties of the question can one fundamentally change the answer.

In *JCVD* the most superficial "answer" is something like "I must be a successful action film star.". But at the very beginning of the film, knowing Van Damme is both character and actor, and probably having a sense of his previous work, there is no hint of the question the statement attempts to answer. In fact, at the beginning of the film we do not even know there is a question. We are thrown into the midst of

an action sequence as we might find in any action film, with Van Damme clearly the hero rescuing a young damsel from an evil army. Now, before that scene even ends the action film aficionado will pick up on low budget features: the stuntman who jumps rather than falls or the other who clearly sets himself to be lit on fire. And the poor quality is obvious to all when the set collapses. Van Damme himself complains of how the scene is shot, even acknowledging the limits given his age rather than blaming the director. In retrospect we can say the “answer” is not working; he is an action star, he can speak of success, yet there is discontent incongruent with what the answer of being a star seems to promise.

I will add here that the opening sequence is important for another reason. At the beginning of the sequence Van Damme is completely a character in the film within the film, but as shooting finishes he steps out of the pure fiction it represents into an in-between space of fiction and reality, and he becomes a meld of a character we are watching and self which exists with us in reality. Later, in the bank, we hear old interviews with Van Damme playing on the television, which I think again reminds us of this unusual in-between space presented in this work. I think this reflects a psychoanalysis, where analyst and analysand work in an in-between space, not the typical every day life yet also not a separated fiction. As an aside, the world of the movie star fan is also in an in-between space, where fans will speak of the actor outside of the characters he portrays, so beyond the fictions, yet without actually knowing the subtleties of the person that can only be available in interactions with the actual person.

Another important and relevant in-between space is in the earliest relationship between mother and infant, when the child, developmentally, lives within a fiction of undifferentiated objects, fantasies, fears, and wishes; of course declaring this a fiction is from an external, adult perspective. To survive and then to develop within a potentially harsh and real external world, the child needs the mother to act as a benign intermediary. This in-between space of mother and infant becomes the space where the mind can grow, can transform. I will return to these ideas a bit further in the paper.

Back to the prologue of the film, the reality of Van Damme, the man, is woven into story immediately with the first court scene. The montage focusses on the attacks against Van Damme, why he is an unfit father. The prosecution explains how Van Damme is known to be disgruntled, alludes to past problems, and highlights the violence of his films. This court can easily be described as a super-ego, and for boys, according to Freud, the super-ego, is the inherited law from identification with the father. So, paradoxically, Van Damme is being told he is not a good father because he is the stereotype of a man! The

court does not hear him when he protests that he is this man who has a heart, made the films in order to feed his children. The scene restates that this superficial “answer” of being an action film star is not working, and further, that others do not see him as the man he aspires to be, a man with heart. I would argue that we can begin to formulate the question that comes after the answer: how does a boy become, not only a man, but, a man with a heart?

I have just referred to the oedipus complex previously. In the simple telling of the oedipus we have a basic tale of how a boy becomes a man. He falls in love with his mother, but fearing castration by the father he identifies with the father, takes on the father's law, and gives up the mother. In this simple tale the mother is simply the love object, and in the simple question of how does the boy become a man, being an action hero is sufficient. But add the subtlety of being a man with heart, and our minds must imagine something more complex.

One more aspect of the film that I will note is the division of the film into a prologue, four acts, and an epilogue. Further, I state that the prologue and epilogue are Van Damme in the world of men, but that in the body of the film it is much less clear. It is not a world of women, either, but rather a world of men where they must face their mothers in a complex way, not only as the love object of the simplified oedipus. Did you, as a member of the audience pick up on the fact that there are four explicitly identified mothers in this film? And beyond that there is at least one implicit mother, and many symbolic mothers throughout the story.

As the story proper begins, we are taken to Schaarbeek, a municipality near Brussels. This is the Motherland, though we would be forgiven not to associate to this as we are taken to yet another action film and two fans, boys really. But being fans, they evoke the in-between space where little is known for certain and there is potential for many things. As Van Damme arrives in this world he is celebrated by the boys, who seek to be identified with the action hero man, where the simple oedipus is sufficient. Even the police officer falls into boyish adoration learning Van Damme is in the area. But the fans can only operate with the superficial facts, and when the first shots are fired, it is easy for them to see Van Damme as a criminal, having “snapped” under his stress, rather than consider him a man with heart.

The character of Commissioner Christian Bruges enters the story. Bruges in certain ways represents an alter ego of Van Damme, at least in terms of being a man with heart. While he represents the law, the inheritance of the father as such, his priority is the well-being of all involved; he has compassion for all, the

hostages and the hostage taker. Further, in maintaining this compassion he is willing to suffer a castration of sorts, to strip naked and be the object of public ridicule, when he and the special police forces member enter the bank. Commissioner Perthier of the special police forces is the reflection of Bruges, but without heart; he simply wants to enforce the law, enforce his will. Bruges contains something that Perthier does not, and they are in conflict after the failure of the ruse attempted by the special forces agent, foiled by Van Damme. Perthier advocates a quick and violent end, raw aggression, contrary to Bruges' compassionate leanings.

Please keep in mind the Bruges-Perthier pair, for I must take a detour to highlight the first mother. Up to the point where Bruges is in the bank, we the audience have the forced external perspective, where we may assume Van Damme is the villain. Only once in the womb of the bank are there clues that things are not as they seem, as one of the hostages (still from the external perspective) pulls a gun, not witnessed by Bruges. Once the police have been speedily kicked out, thanks to Van Damme's intervention, the true villains are revealed. And it is the mother in the group of hostages, the woman with the boy child, who puts voice to the truth of the situation, making note that Van Damme has in fact saved them. She is the representation of the protecting, loving mother who values her child above all else.

And here I compare the Bruges-Perthier pair with Van Damme and the unnamed leader of the robbers. Back in the bank, after the failed special forces intervention, we see the leader and one of the other robbers debating how they are going to get out of their situation. At this point in the film, we are exposed to a viciousness within the leader as the other gang member asks, "...and the kid? Know anyone that would want to have a dead kid on their conscience?". The leader answers yes, referring to himself. It is my impression that this simple affirmation is particularly eerie because he is no longer strictly speaking of getting away with the robbery. The leader is envious of the boy who has the loving mother, and within that envy is willing to kill the boy. And we learn later the boy's name is Damien, thus a stand-in for Van Damme. And if the leader is willing to kill the boy, he is willing to kill anyone – Van Damme, the other hostages, even his fellow conspirators. He contains no heart, no conscience, he has no motive to contain his murderous aggression. At the same time, the mother and her son provide added motive for Van Damme to act from the heart, to not simply launch into violence and be a stereotypical hero.

The second act begins with the words "Time and the hours run through the roughest day", essentially a quote from Macbeth. We are returned back in time to the first court scene where Van Damme's

daughter, Gloria, is being questioned. She describes how she does not want to live with her father because her friends make fun of her every time he is on TV. As an aside, here we also have an implied mother, that of Gloria, and Van Damme's ex-wife. His daughter's statement is the motive for Van Damme's introspection, a recognition of failure; others, even his own daughter, only see a hard exterior of the action star, not the heart he wishes to project. This is represented in the following scene, at his agent's. Van Damme is protesting yet another b-movie project like all those before that killed his career, created the impression others have of him. He insists he would be willing to work for free to do a film of quality, one which would reveal him as more than what others see. But his agent has no interest in a compassionate hero, which is much harder to sell. His ramblings at Van Damme fade into the background until Van Damme erupts with his immediate pain, "I lost my daughter". His agent has no compassion as he throws out the empty phrase, "everything passes". And on the way to the airport a call from Van Damme's lawyers furthers his pain as they notify him that his cheque has bounced and they will drop the case if not paid by noon the next day.

As is the case within an analysis, this flashback, this new history, allows one to look at previously described events from a new perspective. So we in the audience are returned to the video store and then the bank, but now from Van Damme's perspective, something deeper and more intimate. And from this more intimate perspective, with our new knowledge, we understand that Van Damme is not a perpetrator in these events, he is a victim. He does not understand that he has walked in on a robbery. I will point out that the loving mother character has been placed behind the counter as a teller; he does not understand her motive for denying him what he wants, and symbolically she becomes a withholding mother, or a frustrating mother (is this really a prank show?). He does not understand how this woman is in actuality trying to protect both her son and him. Van Damme is brutally made aware of the reality when he is pistol whipped by the envious gang leader.

It is in this act that we are properly introduced to the only named robber, Arthur, who is an adoring fan, and also is a symbolic mother to Van Damme. After the beating Arthur undresses Van Damme and attends to the cut on the lip, so focussed he misses the hostage who goes for his gun which then leads to the shooting. Soon after Arthur defends Van Damme from perceived mocking by one of the hostages. But Arthur cannot be the loving mother Van Damme needs as he is too taken by the star. When he insists Van Damme perform the trick of kicking the cigarette out of the mouth of a man, he is more like a narcissistic

mother who seeks her own gratification in her boy's performance. And Arthur is willing to use Van Damme in order to get away with the robbery.

In another brief tangent I make note of Arthur within an in-between space of the fans. He voices what was noted previously, the opinion often expressed that John Woo in some way betrayed Van Damme. This does not seem to be Van Damme's perspective, or at least he seems to have given up any resentment he may have held towards Woo. But Arthur, as a fan, cannot let go of his resentment, and he expresses his aggression in noting the failure of *Windtalkers*, one of the last John Woo films in Hollywood. As a fan myself, I also note Steven Segal, the actor of similar stature to Van Damme in the film industry, is briefly invoked; Van Damme notes how Segal was willing to cut off his ponytail, a castration, to get a role.

In the third act we again go into the time before the events in the bank. And again we are brought to Van Damme's frustration in trying to manage his financial situation in order to be able to fight for his daughter. He calls his agent, Jeff, a call to a father figure maybe; Jeff tries to trick his way out of even dealing with Van Damme as the actor is of no immediate use to him. Jeff's disinterest is underlined when he doesn't remember Van Damme actually making a film, nor has he read a script that could help financially.

The second explicitly identified mother is highlighted in the following scene – mainly the taxi driver; remember that she insists on a photo which will be for her son. The taxi driver represents a narcissistic mother who's pride in her child ultimately must serve her own needs. There was a hint of this in the previous act when she complains to Bruges in the midst of the chaos: yes, there is a hold-up going on, but what about her cab? In that scene we might forgive her given the overwhelming emotions that can come with the scenario, particularly as her car was hit by the first shot. However, in the later scene occurring earlier in time, her narcissism is established as part of her character. Once Van Damme is off the phone with his unhelpful agent, the taxi driver addresses him, identifying him as her idol. After his long flight he begins to note that he just wants to rest. And she immediately responds with a mixed message: "Don't start acting like a bigshot, please. My hero of the century!". She essentially states that he cannot be independent, he can only be a hero if he is her possession. He immediately begins to apologize to her but this falls on deaf ears as she needs to relentlessly hurl complaints and criticisms along with the message of what he owes her and the adoring Belgian public. He is the representative of the Belgian people in Hollywood and how dare he consider his own needs. I feel the depth of the narcissism is exposed when

she tells him she does not even need his words; he can rest his eyes as long as he lets her speak. And of course he must still agree to having a photo with her taken – he does agree.

I am intrigued by Van Damme's reaction to her for he could easily have defended himself. In fact, if he had no interest in being compassionate to her, a little masculine aggression, like telling her she has no right to be presumptuous and to shut up, would likely have been very effective. Instead he is compliant in her presence. One could argue that this is the astute response given his fame, but I am taken by how naturally he seems to take to an appeasing stance. It is a type of compassion, but a compassion that is demanded rather than freely given. One might wonder if he learned this in his own infancy.

The film returns to the immediate events and we are introduced to the third explicit mother, Van Damme's mother. His mother, within this film, is quite nondescript, she does not show much of her character. Mostly she is anxious and quiet, worried for her son, compliant with the police, and mostly ineffectual. But she is necessary to the story. She is not absent; despite her tendency to fade into the background, she is present. And an anxious mother does have some crossover with the narcissistic mother, though less pathological. An anxious mother is somewhat distant from the infant as well, though the distraction is more external anxieties than the distraction by the self of the narcissistic mother.

At the time of the phone call from Van Damme's mother to the bank the conflict between Van Damme and the leader of the robbers is escalating. On the phone Van Damme cannot comfort his mother with the fact of his innocence. The call ends at the demand of the leader, and in the next exchange the fourth explicit mother is revealed:

JCVD: It was my mother.

Leader: I don't give a shit about your mother. Wanna hear about mine? Last time I saw her...

JCVD: What?

Leader: ...was when I was born. He tries to screw me, then he makes me cry.

The fourth mother is the absent mother, the mother that can offer nothing to the boy becoming the man. And the man – as represented by the robber leader – is a man without heart. Not a hero but a villain, filled with hate and anger and envy, ready to extinguish all love and life in ruthless violence. And as Van Damme and the leader stand off against each other we hear the loving mother being released and calling out for her son, we hear the pain as they are forcibly separated. Outside Van Damme's own mother is witness to the loving mother's release. She seems perplexed.

Now we come to the most intriguing scene in the film, where Van Damme is lifted out of the set for his soliloquy. We the audience are reminded of the in-between space of this film, in-between fact and

fiction. And while the speech may seem a bit disjointed at first it can be seen as free association, evoking the in-between space of the analytic situation, and the in-between space of mother and infant, where Van Damme speaks both to himself, in reflection, and to us the audience, a necessary witness.

The soliloquy starts with the words, "This movie is for me. There we are, you and me.". We are being asked to participate, to listen actively rather than view the film passively. Van Damme enters a deep introspection. He admits to a promise he has not yet delivered; seen as a competition he has lost. But maybe this is not a competition and maybe he has not lost. "Where the answer comes before the question" there are hurdles. He thought the answer was being a successful movie star, a man. But living this answer came with the unexpected:

So America, poverty, stealing to eat, stalking producers, actors, movie stars. Going to clubs, hoping to see a star, with my pictures, karate magazines. It's all I had. I didn't speak English.

English and the language of Hollywood was not his mother tongue. He notes his many wives, reflected in the mothers of this film, and trying to choose between them is not possible. Trying to replace her with cocaine failed. He failed to take in his mother in all her facets so ultimately he failed to answer the question. But he now is aware; he had an answer that turned out to be an illusion and recognizing it as such he better understands the question. Again, the question is not exactly defined, but I feel it resembles a very fundamental question we all share in some ways: "What does it take for me to achieve contentment, where I can enjoy my life and share it with those that I love?". He is just a regular guy, like all those who did not succeed, and all the privileges of being a star did not answer the question. The newer answer, to be a man with heart, must be sought actively, particularly in a world of stardom where amongst fans and paparazzi it is so easy to be judged and blamed. Lowered back into the womb of the bank Van Damme turns to Arthur and states "We've got to free the hostages."

The fourth act begins with Arthur, now allied with Van Damme, spying on the other robbers as the leader is planning the death of hostages to gain control, and acting as a distraction as Van Damme is able to free the boy. Van Damme is now acting as a man with heart, and must face the final showdown with the robber leader. He does not need to exhibit bravado – he begs for his life while staring down the leader's gun, and must rely on someone else, Arthur, to be spared death. And now it is Arthur, the villain with heart, who faces off against the leader. The leader cannot stop his viciousness as he verbally attacks Arthur. In his viciousness he attempts to invoke the father's will by belittling Arthur as a boy, trying to stake his

claim against the maternal influence insinuating Arthur is the child of violence, of rape. This final attempt to obliterate compassion legitimizes Arthur's execution of the leader, "We said not the mothers."

Arthur must die for his crime so that Van Damme may be heir to the mother's influence and become the man with heart. They have their final moment of bonding, where the male compassion and love that is a product of loving mothers and fathers, can be shared. Van Damme predicts Arthur's suicide by police, and as Arthur is shot dead the film suggests mourning as the next moments play out in silence even while the police enter violently.

In another interesting technique in this film we are presented with three endings to the stand-off, and I suggest we are witnessing the birth of three potential children. The first resolution is that Van Damme is held hostage and remains passive while rescued and subsequently arrested; certainly this is not the birth of the man he wishes to be. The second ending is the old solution, where he saves himself in front of an adoring crowd, he is the action hero where all failure is lost in masculine glory; while this would be the end to many an action film, we know that this cannot be the end to this film. So I pose that the third ending is a real ending. Van Damme is active in saving himself but is not washed clean of his crime, his previous failures. Is this last ending not the human condition? That we must find contentment in continuing to move ahead, trying to be a person with heart, acknowledging our imperfections and failures.

This film has presented, from the perspective of Jean Claude Van Damme, thoughts of what it takes to be content as a man, and to be recognized as a man with compassion and love, a man with heart. With the loss of his daughter he was confronted by the fact that in being the action film star, a stereotype of the man, is a failure. The oversimplified oedipal tale certainly can produce a man, but on its own cannot guarantee what type of man the boy becomes. For that, Van Damme had to remember his mother, and here, not only the sexual object of the oedipus complex, but also the early mother that hopefully helps create the potential for growth. A complete absence of the mother can only lead to raw masculine aggression which may lead to triumph in a strictly masculine world, but cannot provide contentment of love and compassion. And there are more hurdles for the infant boy when he must face his mother's needs and anxieties. But if he can remember a good enough love and care, he can flourish into a compassionate and loving man that any can recognize as such.

Now to the epilogue of the film. Van Damme is returned from the in-between space back to a masculine world and the father's law. Remember, he has actually committed a crime. But unlike the first

time he left court at the beginning of the film, this time he leaves relaxed and smiling. He is willing to face punishment within the father's law because his crime was part of regaining and integrating the memory of a mother's love. He can now be admired as real man rather than adored as a superficial masculine stereotype. And despite his imprisonment he is rewarded. He can be a role model for other men in returning to one of his passions by teaching karate. But far more important than that, he is rewarded with his daughter, the final shot before the credits.

In wishing to honour our theme of transformation it is easy to say the fictional story presented tells such a tale. The character of Van Damme evolves as a man. But this film uses techniques to create an in-between world where it is not enough for us to be a passive viewer. We are active witnesses to this transformation just as an analyst is witness to an analysand's change in a psychoanalysis, just as a mother might need to witness her son's full potential so he can transform from boy to man. The result may be imperfect; Van Damme has not become the next great dramatic actor nor has his behaviour always remained exemplary. Now I must present my final challenge to you: in being witness to this film, an active witness, can we allow ourselves a transformation, to an understanding of this man, Jean Claude Van Damme, as more than an action film star? That, in fact, we can view him as a man with heart.

Thank you.