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Silent Night (2023 film)

Silent Night is a 2023 American action thriller film directed by John Woo, and starring Joel Kinnaman, Scott "Kid Cudi" Mescudi, Harold Torres, and Catalina Sandino Moreno. The film, which features minimal spoken dialogue, follows an aggrieved father avenging the death of his son, who was killed by local gang members in a drive-by shooting on Christmas Eve.

Silent Night was Woo's first American film since *Paycheck* in 2003. Filming took place in Mexico City from April to May 2022. It was released by Lionsgate in the United States on December 1, 2023 to mixed reviews from critics and only grossed \$11 million worldwide.

Plot

Brian Godlock is an electrician living a happy life in the fictional town of Las Palomas, Texas with his wife Saya and young son Taylor Michael. On Christmas Eve in 2021, Brian and Taylor are using a new bicycle on their front lawn. They are caught in the crossfire of a drive-by shooting in the middle of a gang war and Taylor is killed. Brian immediately tries to catch and kill the gangsters only for Playa, the leader of one of the gangs, to shoot him in the throat and leave him for dead. Brian survives, but his vocal cords have been severely damaged. Brian and Saya grieve over Taylor's death and Saya tries to be emotionally supportive to Brian during his physical recovery, but Brian becomes cold and distant, focused only on pursuing revenge for Taylor.

Saya becomes emotionally overwhelmed and leaves Brian, who plans to kill all the gang members involved in Taylor's death on Christmas Eve in 2022. Over the course of the next year, Brian engages in bodybuilding, familiarizing himself with deadly weaponry and self-defense training. At one point, Brian appears to attempt to visit Detective Dennis Vassel, who offered to help in his son's case. Brian instead uses this opportunity to gather information on Playa's gang and begins reconnaissance on them, collecting evidence that will help put them away. Saya attempts to contact Brian, expressing that she and his parents are worried about him, but he continues to ignore her text messages. Brian

Silent Night



Theatrical release poster

Directed by	<u>John Woo</u>
Written by	Robert Archer Lynn
Produced by	Christian Mercuri Lori Tilkin deFelice <u>Basil Iwanyk</u> Erica Lee John Woo
Starring	<u>Joel Kinnaman</u> <u>Scott Mescudi</u> <u>Harold Torres</u> <u>Catalina Sandino Moreno</u>
Cinematography	Sharone Meir
Edited by	<u>Zach Staenberg</u>
Music by	<u>Marco Beltrami</u>
Production companies	Capstone Global <u>Thunder Road Films</u>

attacks and abducts a member of Playa's gang, threatening him in an attempt to provide written information on the gang's activity.

The thug briefly manages to escape only for Brian to subdue him in a fight. Brian delivers the bound thug to Vassel's house, along with a Christmas card, containing his intent to kill Playa and his gang, and a thumb drive with the evidence he has collected, along with the thug's written contributions to his information. He also sends two of the thug's amputated fingers to Playa, intimidating him. Brian spends the entire night of Christmas Eve 2022 killing the members of Playa's gang one by one, often interrupting their crimes in the process. After stealing a cell phone from a thug and using it to record a video of himself being killed and sending it to Playa, the gang leader sends a group text for his soldiers to meet him at his place. Brian takes the opportunity to trap and kill them all there.

After a massive gunfight and fistfight bloodbath as he fights his way to Playa, Brian finds himself confronted by Vassel. Initially pointing their guns at one another, both silently put them down and agree to work as a team to finish off Playa. Playa's drug-addicted girlfriend manages to get the drop on them, shooting them both, only for Brian to sneak around and hold her at gunpoint. She drops her gun and feigns surrender. When Brian hesitates to kill her, Playa's girlfriend unveils a hidden sidearm and attacks him with it. Brian manages to kill her and confronts Playa. In the shootout between them, Playa manages to get the upper hand and is about to shoot Brian in the throat again, but Vassel shoots Playa, allowing Brian to finish him off.

Brian and Vassel fall to the floor and look up at the ceiling and Christmas decorations, bleeding out and dying. Brian sees reflections of his memories of his time with Taylor and hallucinates an alternate future, where he and Taylor are both still alive. Saya opens a letter that Brian wrote to her, where Brian apologizes for how cold he has become in their marriage and thanks her for loving him. Brian further tells that he knows no one can make Taylor's death right, but that he is going to die trying. Saya takes the letter to Taylor's grave, where Brian had earlier brought his previously unopened Christmas present (a toy train set) that he built and set up around his grave.

Cast

- Joel Kinnaman as Brian Godlock
- Kid Cudi as Detective Dennis Vassel
- Harold Torres as Playa
- Catalina Sandino Moreno as Saya
- Yoko Hamamura as Ruiz
- Valeria Santaella as Venus
- Vinny O'Brien as Anthony Barelo
- Acoyani Chacon as Webface

Production

	Capstone Studios A Better Tomorrow Films
Distributed by	<u>Lionsgate</u>
Release date	December 1, 2023
Running time	104 minutes ^[1]
Country	United States
Language	English
Box office	\$11.1 million ^{[2][3]}

In October 2021, *Silent Night* was first announced as an action film without spoken dialogue, with John Woo as director and Joel Kinnaman as lead star.^{[4][5]} In March 2022, a special effects assistant was injured during pre-production in a stunt trial run in Mexico City. The crew member was hit by a car, breaking his femur and dislocating his shoulder.^[6] In April 2022, Kid Cudi, Harold Torres, and Catalina Sandino Moreno were added to the cast.^[7] Principal photography began in April 2022 in Mexico City.^[7] Filming wrapped on May 17, 2022.^{[8][9]} Marco Beltrami composed the film's score.^[10]

"The whole movie is without dialogue. It allowed me to use visuals to tell the story, to tell how the character feels. We are using music instead of language. And the movie is all about sight and sound. The budget was a little tight, and the schedule was tight, but it made me change my working style. Usually, for a big movie, a studio movie, we shoot a lot of coverage, then leave it to the cutting room. But in this movie, I tried to combine things without doing any coverage shots. I had to force myself to use a new kind of technique. Some scenes were about two or three pages, but I did it all in one shot".

John Woo (director)^[11]

In March 2023, producer Erica Lee confirmed the film features no dialogue, explaining "It really has no dialogue. It was another spec script that I was given and read, and I was like, 'This is either going to be a genius move or a disaster, there's no in between.' It's execution dependent for sure. I mean, John Woo kills it. Joel Kinnaman is the star and really delivers. I mean, there's some ambient noise and background and chatter like radio and stuff like that. But, yeah, it's awesome. I can't wait for you to see it."^[12]

Woo decided to film the action in a more realistic manner that supports the emotional drama instead of having the action itself being the entertaining aspect, which was signature of his previous films.^[13] For the film, Kinnaman decided to try method acting for the first time and stop speaking for the entirety of the shoot. The lack of communication left the actor feeling lonely, and after multiple start attempts, he decided that the silent car ride to his first day on set was long enough to get him excited for the film.^[14]

Release

In September 2023, it was announced that Lionsgate had acquired the distribution rights for the film. The film was theatrically released on December 1, 2023.^[15]

Home media

Silent Night was released for digital platforms on December 19, 2023, followed by a Blu-ray, DVD and 4K UHD release on January 30, 2024.^[16]

Reception

Box office

In the United States and Canada, the film was released alongside *Renaissance: A Film by Beyoncé*, *Godzilla Minus One*, and *The Shift*, and was originally projected to gross \$6-8 million from 1,870 theatres in its opening weekend.^[17] After making \$1 million on its first day (including \$250,000 from Thursday night previews), estimates were lowered to \$2–3 million. It went on to debut to \$3 million, finishing ninth.^[18]

Critical response

On the review aggregator website Rotten Tomatoes, 58% of 118 critics' reviews are positive, with an average rating of 5.6/10. The website's consensus reads: "*Silent Night* reaffirms that an action movie doesn't need much dialogue if the set pieces are solid enough—and that even second-tier John Woo can be worth the price of admission."^[19] Metacritic, which uses a weighted average, assigned the film a score of 53 out of 100, based on 29 critics, indicating "mixed or average" reviews.^[20] Audiences surveyed by CinemaScore gave the film an average grade of "C" on an A+ to F scale, while those polled by PostTrak gave it a 67% overall positive score, with 38% saying they would definitely recommend the film.^[18]

David Ehrlich of IndieWire panned the film, grading it a "D" and stating that "the kindest thing I can say about [John Woo's] latest film[...] is that its worst moments don't resemble the cinema of John Woo at all".^[21] Kyle Smith of The Wall Street Journal criticized the decision to have no dialogue in the film, stating that the result is "surprisingly dull".^[22]

Peter Debruge of Variety wrote, "Silly as it might be, *Silent Night* gives audiences reason to get excited about the Hong Kong innovator once again, ranking as one of the few bloody Christmas counterprogrammers since *Die Hard* that feels worthy of repeat viewing down the road".^[23] Frank Scheck of The Hollywood Reporter wrote, "It's to Woo's and screenwriter Robert Lynn's credit, as well the fiercely commanding, intensely physical performance by Kinnaman, that the film's lack of dialogue proves not a gimmick but an asset. Norma Desmond would surely have approved". He noted the film's highlight was "not one of many lavishly staged gun battles, but an intensely brutal, lengthy hand-to-hand combat between Brian and one of Playa's minions that makes the classic fight scene in Hitchcock's *Torn Curtain* seem like a schoolyard tussle".^[24]

Glenn Kenny of The New York Times praised the film for its well-crafted and brutal action scenes, stating that "there's a lot of sound and fury and it works: This is suspenseful and cathartic, and even the schmaltzy stuff is so distinctly John Woo that it's welcome."^[25] Matt Zoller Seitz of RogerEbert.com gave the film a score of four out of four stars, considering it to be among the best films directed by Woo and "one of the most deliriously cinematic movies of the year". He emphasized that with Woo's bold yet elegant editing style, "[t]he clichés of the action/revenge movie ultimately stop seeming merely familiar and begin to feel ritualistic", and stated, "Movies like this don't work unless the people who made them aren't afraid to risk going too far[....] Sometimes, if they keep pushing and pushing, they overcome any supposed rational objections the viewer might have, and there's a breakthrough. The floodgates open, and the feeling that pours forth is magnificent, rare, and sublime".^[26]

In 2024, film critic Scout Tafoya, a colleague of Seitz on RogerEbert.com, included *Silent Night* in his video series "The Unloved", where he expressed disappointment in how "very few people seemed willing to engage with the visual language of the movie." He reasoned that "Woo relied purely on his chops as an imagemaker to tell the story of *Silent Night*, an admittedly simplistic, perhaps too contemporary story of

revenge modelled on the more popular, retrograde version of action cinema from the last 20 years." Tafoya summarized that "As a work of incredibly intelligent visuals, of storytelling without a spoken word, this is a triumph. And as a John Woo film it's an instant classic to rank among his best..."^[27]

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