



## Black coal, thin ice

**Director:** Diao Yi'nan

**Country:** China

**Date:** 2014

A review by David Erlich for *littlewhitelies.co.uk*:

This Chinese thriller scooped the top prize at the 2014 Berlin Film Festival, and it's not hard to see why. Diao Yinan's startlingly bleak new film, as well-directed a noir as any this side of Chinatown, begins with a sequence in which a man's severed arm makes its way from the back of a truck to the black river of a conveyor belt in a coal factory in northern China. When an attentive worker finally spots the errant limb, the machinery is shut down just before any damage can be done to the equipment or the company that owns it. In *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, men are practically invisible until they interfere with business, and women completely so until they interfere with men.

Intercut with the discovery of the first clue in what's soon revealed to be a gruesome murder mystery – the rest of the victim's body is pieced together from the scattered parts found at a number of different factories throughout the day – is the last hurrah of the extramarital affair between a gruff detective named Zhang Zili (Liao Fan) and a woman who physically has to wrestle free from him in order to put an end to things. Zhang is assigned to the case, but everything immediately goes to shit when a routine meeting with two suspects devolves into cinema's most alarmingly casual shootout. Cut to five years later, when Zhang – now a traumatised alcoholic without a badge or his bearings – is roped back into the detective game after new corpses turn up, the deceased all men who were involved with the original victim's mousy wife, Wu Zhizhen (Gwei Lun-Mei).

Diao's directorial efforts have always been darker than the populist fare he once penned for other filmmakers (i.e. Zhang Yang's charming *Shower*), but *Black Coal, Thin Ice* is so frigid and nihilistic that it makes his fluffier offerings feel retroactively disingenuous. Set in a barren pocket of the country where most of the available light is emitted from neon signage, the film's world exudes a suffocating sense of indifference that's fundamentally opposed to the practice of solving crimes. As a result, Zhang's investigation into Wu's personal life becomes less about the information he's able to uncover than it does the means by which he's able to uncover it (read: stalking the quiet laundromat employee and forcibly insinuating himself into her routine). The boorish lout hounds the girl around town, practically chasing her down as she tries to skate away on the slick road of ice that juts out from the local rink.

Liao's performance marks Zhang as a man who's both wounded and feral in equal measure, and when he tells a fellow detective that he's, "Just looking for something to do so my life isn't a total loss," it's hard not to be endeared to his cause. However, the notion that Zhang isn't a bad guy, and certainly not as bad as Wu's sexually violent boss or any of the other men who have cornered her into silence, becomes all the more odious as her role in the murders comes into focus. Which is to say that this oblique film is less interested in catching a killer than it is in identifying their victims.



Diao has a knack for always putting his camera in precisely the right place, and his flagrant disregard for logic in the film's final reel only makes you want to look closer. The bonkers climax, which illustrates why the movie was released in China under the title of "Daylight Fireworks," so beautifully smudges the line between justice and surrender that the film transcends the tropes of film noir and becomes consumed by a rage it doesn't know how to quell.

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