# Takashi Miike's crime thriller First Love is a wild ride

*Welcome to Cheat Sheet, our breakdown-style reviews of festival films, VR previews, and other special event releases. This review comes from the 2019 Toronto International Film Festival.*

"This is fucking *wild*!" a wounded yakuza member bellows to no one in particular, deep into the heart of Takashi Miike's latest action-thriller, *First Love*. And he certainly isn't wrong. The line may read like a self-congratulatory bit of meta-commentary, like Miike and screenwriter Masaru Nakamura praising themselves for the sheer extremity of the situation they've gotten their characters into. By the time he delivers the line, Miike and Nakamura have already crammed the film with warring Japanese gangs, a modern-day samurai, a ruthless assassin, an escaped sex slave, a one-armed triad boss, a huge bag of drugs, and a lot more excuses for bloody confrontations.

But given that the character delivers the line from the back seat of a wildly spinning vehicle that's being chased by both the yakuza and a triad, and that he's bleeding out while covered from head to toe in meth, it's also a pretty relatable moment. The film *is* fucking wild, in the most joyously excessive and ridiculous kind of way, and the audience is likely to feel the exact same emotions he's expressing.

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## WHAT'S THE GENRE?

Crime thriller. Miike has worked in a wide variety of genres,

from the gruesome body horror (and social commentary) of *Audition* to the farcical musical comedy of *The Happiness of the Katakuris* to the traditional children's fantasy of *The Great Yokai War*. But he often returns to the underworld of his native Japan, where clashes between yakuza factions, between law enforcement agents and criminals, or between foreigners and home-grown gangsters all provide rich opportunities for the extreme violence that made him famous. In spite of the tender title, *First Love* isn't primarily focused on romance. It's more about corruption, betrayal, and clashing agendas between amoral characters who are all doggedly chasing the same payout.

## WHAT'S IT ABOUT?

It takes a while for *First Love* to come into focus, because there are so many characters to introduce, and it's initially unclear which ones matter, and which ones are bullet fodder. But a few eventually emerge as key to the story: Monica (Sakurako Konishi) is an addict paying off her father's debts with sex work, while accumulating her own debts to her abusive pimps, Yasu (Takahiro Miura) and his Western girlfriend Julie (credited only as "Becky"). Yasu and Julie are in the middle of a big drug deal for a yakuza group, but one of the yakuza, Kase (Shôta Sometani) has drawn corrupt cop Otomo (Nao Ohmori) into an plan to steal and resell the drugs, and frame Monica. Meanwhile, a young up-and-coming boxer, Leo (Masataka Kubota) is informed that he has a brain tumor, his boxing career is over, and he doesn't have long to live.

*First Love*'s title comes from the relationship between Monica and Leo, who meet under stressful circumstances and form a bond that initially means everything to her, and not much to him. She initially looks like a fairly standard crime-picture damsel in distress, too meek and damaged to be a femme fatale, but just as capable of drawing a hero into a deadly conflict. But the meat of the film isn't really in their relationship –

it’s in Kase’s ambition, Julie’s outsized rage once the plot kicks into gear, Otomo’s weaselly behavior, and the way the stakes ramp up when the Chinese triad boss also takes an interest in Yasu’s stash.



*Photo: Well Go USA*

## WHAT’S IT REALLY ABOUT?

*First Love* is more about outsized characters and big action than subtle themes, but on some level, it’s certainly about how connection defines people, and how new connections can help people escape old nightmares. Without entirely realizing what he’s doing, Leo helps Monica find a way through her history of abuse. In less positive developments, Kase and Otomo pull each other away from their respective organizations, and toward betrayals that set everyone on a much more dangerous path. Nearly everyone in the movie is trying for a come-up, but only the people who show some loyalty and selflessness have a chance of actually surviving where their new connections put them.

## IS IT GOOD?

It’s a blast. Some of Miike’s crime dramas can be humorless, dour, or overwhelmingly gory – he’s an extremely prolific director, sometimes averaging four films per year, and he’s worked in a lot of different modes. But he has a notable streak of dark humor as well, and it frequently emerges in *First Love*. Many of the characters are oversized stereotypes, like the honor-bound yakuza member who carries a katana and once cut the arm off a member of the triad that’s gunning for his crew. It says something that their mortal enmity – with the triad member emerging from prison with bloody vengeance on his mind – barely rates as a minor sub-subplot in this crowded narrative.



*Photo: Well Go USA*

But part of *First Love*’s humor is in the use of familiar types doing familiar things in particularly grandiose ways. Their face-off, teased throughout the film, reads a bit like a gag because it feels like something more suited to a samurai epic than a gangland picture. But when it finally comes, it’s

thrilling.

Leo and Monica's budding romance is treated more seriously, but not in a particularly sentimental way. She's damaged and needy; he's a bit of a gentle dope, spending most of the movie fairly removed from the action because he's still processing his diagnosis. It takes a fairly extreme crisis to wake him up to what's going on around him. Their relationship isn't entirely satisfying – her weakness and his blankness are both detriments to the story – but it does lead to one of the film's most striking visual and emotional moments, as Leo inadvertently gives her a new way to look at the specter of her sexually abusive father.

Mostly, though, *First Love* is the kind of film that's designed for seen-it-all genre fans who know these tropes (the scheming criminal, the dewy ingenues, the cold-hearted lady assassin, and so on) and appreciate seeing them tweaked in new directions, and treated with an air of fond familiarity rather than dour airlessness. *First Love* isn't a comedy, but it piles up the abrupt surprises and "I can't believe that just happened" laughs. Miike doesn't treat any of the storylines here particularly seriously, but he does create a significant tension around how it'll all come out in the end. The film is troubled in some ways – it's so overcrowded that it's initially hard to tell the characters apart or sort out their agendas, and the buildup is much messier than the payoff. But it's all worth it for that end result, which is, inevitably, fucking wild.

## WHAT SHOULD IT BE RATED?

Hard R. While not as graphically violent as some of Miike's more exceptional work, it's set in a world where criminals go after each other with guns, knives, and sometimes swords, and the results are messy.

## HOW CAN I ACTUALLY WATCH IT?

*First Love* opens in limited theatrical release in New York City and Los Angeles on September 27th, and will enter wide release on October 4th. Check the film’s website for available theaters and dates.

https://www.theverge.com/2019/9/27/20887161/first-love-movie-review-takashi-miike-crime-thriller-yakuza-triad-war