

Yimou zhang films

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Lecturer: Yimou Zhang The red color is one of common themes in films directed by Chinese director Yimou Zhang. This is especially evidenced in his popular films such as Red Dress (The story of Qui Ju), Red Silk, Red Sorghum (1993), and Red Lantern (Raise the Red Lantern) (2003). All of these are highly sensuous and symbolic. This is in line to the culture of Chinese theatre which is considered to be full of color symbols. A black face generally symbolizes bravery; a red face represents loyalty while a white face suggests evil. Most of these symbols have transcended through time from the old generation to the new generation. The new generation, which Yimou Zhang currently works in, has upheld the color symbols of the old generation and even introduced some new ones as well. The color red is the most outstanding and is symbolic of revolution: little red books, red flags, red guards and not forgetting the red sun, which is symbolic of Chairman Mao. It is along this culture that Yimou Zhang also uses the color red as symbolic. Literature review on the subject reveals contradictory and far ranging interpretations to Yimou Zhang's red. There are those that construe the red setting identified at the end of Red Sorghum to the red spot in the Japanese national flag. There are those who interpret red lanterns seen in Raise the Red Lantern symbolic of the sexual control of the patriarchal despot. Moreover, the setting sun may also serve to elegize the demised heroine and the red lanterns may also symbolize the accomplishment of the concubine's desire. The red color as used by Yimou Zhang, similar to other symbols employed by the director, transcends narrow interpretation since it emanates from and also acts as rebellion against tradition. The color red now takes up a myriad of symbols and not merely as a symbol of celebration in

traditional china; or the symbol of revolution according to modern china, or a symbol of malice. The color red can also be symbolic of mood. This is according to Yimou Zhang who stated that the Chinese people are often too reserved and too moderate... the limitless fields of red sorghum elicit sensory excitement and encourage an unrestrained lust and zest for life. Another common theme that can be evidenced in films directed by Chinese film director Yimou Zhang is politics. The color red by Zhang contains to a significant extent contains political messages and inferences. Being brought up in the era of Chairman Mao, the Chinese Communist revolutionary and the founding father of the Peoples Republic of China, Zhang was sick of the Mao's practice and theory of " class struggle." Zhang therefore tends to include the message of freedom, exuberance including the inherently primal desires and aspirations that were denied him and those of his generation by Communism and Confucianism. Zhang Yimou is all too familiar with restrained living. His childhood was intensively miserable raised by a father who worked as a Nationalist Officer commonly considered as a bad element. Due to the breaking out of the Cultural Revolution in China, Zhang Yimou was sent to the countryside in order to be reeducated by the peasants.

In contrast to the realistic style that is predominant in the aesthetics employed by western films, the Chinese traditional artistic expression of style, which is highly symbolic, puts much emphasis on the meaning that is implicated behind the presentation. Chinese art mainly opts to show simple or abstract objects and leave imaginative space for the audience to work out, appreciate and construe that hidden theme on themselves. In Chinese films, it is possible to find artistic concepts that are produced in accordance to the

point of view of traditional Chinese aesthetics. The employment of formative arts, including costumes, sets and make up is one of the predominant features of Yimou Zhang's artistic expression. Yimou Zhang is reputed as one of the exceptional masters in employing symbolic imago as a means of characterizing and conveying the plot of the film without heavily relying on lines. This is especially evidenced in his film *Hero*, whereby his manipulation of cinematic aesthetics comes to light.

Since Yimou Zhang was originally a cinematographer before shifting to film director, Yimou Zhang likes and is more adept at using fine arts elements and specifically color as a means of expressing himself. Since his first film, *Red Sorghum* (1987), Yimou Zhang has relied on color in using it as the fundamental narrative language in his story telling. Yimou Zhang considers color does not merely serve the purposes of visual impact but is also used for communicating and divulging the implicated and often hidden thematic content. Color is especially effective at invoking psychological and physiological and emotional responses. These responses are a way of reacting to the associations that the audience makes in relation to their past experiences and cultural heritage. There exist more than enough life contexts and experiences that are required in drawing out some generalizations on how color affects each individual emotionally.

In *Hero* (2002), Yimou Zhang is exceptional at employing film aesthetics, whereby the film is considered as a full and exceptional feast of color manipulation. The story of this film is based on the history of the attempt to assassinate the King of Qin who was able to unite china but was highly criticized due to his use of excessive of and autocratic form of leadership. At

the film's onset, the first scene depicts a prefect from a small village named "nameless," entering the King's palace with the intent of meeting with Qin. At this time, Qin has gone through countless assassination attempts by numerous assassins. However, there are three current assassins whose mastery of martial arts and effectiveness has had the king fearing for his life and even offering a handsome bounty and gifts for anyone successful and killing the three. The three assassins are named, Broken Sword, Long Sky, and Flying Snow. Due to the fear for his life that has been instilled by these renowned assassins, the King has put in place exceptional measures at ensuring his safety. For one, none of the visitors is allowed to approach the King within 100 paces in the main hall, except he who has triumphed at slaying the assassins. Nameless claims that he has been successful at killing all three assassins and brings forth their weapons as evidence. In reward, Nameless is allowed to approach the king within only 10 paces. In this scene, Yimou Zhang employs a pure dark tone. As Nameless arrives at Qin's palace, the uniform donned by the soldiers, Qin's armor, the palace including Nameless' clothes are all in black. In most cultures, including both the western and the Chinese, black is normally associated with a solemn and mysterious atmosphere including the sense of hierarchy. The color black is also used to convey a signal of uncertain danger. When the king is being filmed, the view is always shot from a low angle as a means of portraying his majesty and authority. He is donned in heavy thick black armor, despite the fact that he is in his own palace and in this way conveying his ever present threat on his life and danger. His palace is also peculiar in that instead of the typical palace that is characterized by bright colors, beautiful furniture and

ornaments; Qin's palace consists of an empty hall with minimal lighting and lacking any form of ornaments. The main intention for this design as Qin puts it: is to provide the enemy with minimal chance of harming the king. This is also the purpose of the strict rule on the distance between the visitor and the King.

As Nameless recollects from his memory on how he was able to slay the three assassins, everyone in his flashback is donned in black attire except sky whose attire is earth yellow. According to the five elements of Chinese philosophy (wood, golden, fire, water and earth), earth is considered the most basic and important element which is also a symbol for the people. Therefore, by donning Sky in earth yellow attire, Sky is represented as a person for justice and his heart beats to help people in need. The contrasting of colors between yellow and black is used to portray the contrast between evil and justice. The clothes worn by Nameless during this instance are black in color indicating that he is serving an evil king and therefore contests with righteous and just men whose purpose is to protect their people of the Zhao state. The second flashback is Nameless' recollection of how he used the message of Sky's demise as means of distancing the relationship between Snow and Sword since Sky and Snow were once lovers. This entire scene is toned with red color including the school building's calligraphy where Snow and Moon lived, the building and all furniture are all dyed red including the attire donned by every character including the teacher and the students. Additionally, the Chinese character " sword", that Nameless had written by Sword was done in red. In this recollection, Nameless depicts Snow and Sword as narrow minded and impulsive. Nameless narrates to the couple of

how Sky purposed that his lover would avenge for him before meeting his death. Moon and Sword have sex with each other as a means of retaliating Snow before Snow being full of rage slew Sword and later Moon in an epic fight fought at populous woods.

The red tone in this scene is used to portray the intense jealousy of Snow, the fury and impulsion of Snow and the avengement of Moon. This is in addition to representing the blood, violence and death which are mostly symbolized by the color red in most cultures including those of the west. In the last scene of this flash back, Snow uses her sword impale Moon at which instance he falls to the ground. As moon falls to the ground, the entire scene is filled with golden yellow leaves that slowly turn to blood shot red. These colors play a critical role in highlighting the war between Qin and Zhao in addition to that of the intensely complex motion of love affairs. The people of Zhao are all depicted in red while the warriors in Qin's army are all donned in black. The red used in this instance conveys a different meaning. This red is used a symbol of the long and enduring spirit of unyielding and challenge between cold blooded war and warm blooded patriotism. This red is especially used in accordance to Chinese aesthetics: warm, positive, righteousness.

As this tale comes to an end, Qin is able to identify the lie and accuse Nameless, who in reality is the real threat, of coming up with a fallacy concerning the duels with the three assassins who ended up giving up their own lives in order to accord him with the opportunity of nearing the King within ten paces using his unique skill, which is able to strike an enemy fatally in a distance of ten steps. This film portrayed the story when

Nameless presented the king with Sky's weapons as the evidence that he was able to slay the assassins. This is a made up imagination that the King thinks is an actual occurrence. At this instance, the director employs the color blue as the thematic color. Since the King is well aware that the couple is righteous and noble people, he does not believe that they were capable of doing what Nameless claimed they did. The king construes that Sky purposefully lost to the fight to Nameless. In addition, Snow and Sword also decided play along with the idea as means of providing Nameless with the invaluable opportunity of slaying the king. At this instance, the entire setting including the clothing of the characters is blue in color. According to the Chinese culture including most other cultures, blue is the color of reason, honesty, and objectiveness. It also has a cooling effect on the audience and helps them to feel rational and calm down after being confronted by the blood shot red scenes. The director's use of a positive blue color additionally serves to express the highly complex but rational understanding and appreciation between the assassin and the target. Moreover, the hairstyle also serves to characterize this aspect.

Similarly, in the film *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), Zhang Yimou depends on color in order to convey his message and engage the audience. This is especially the case in the last which is tapped in snow white. The presence of snow in October ends up making a creative addition to the visual aesthetics of this film. In this scene, snow can be construed as highly symbolic. At first the forest is brightly colored with purple, yellow, green and red trees and these are suddenly colored white by thick layer of snow. This coloration serves to unfold the culminating events that the audience is yet to

experience. The pure white color of the snow is a symbol of a new beginning: it signifies the end. Additionally, the snow is gradually covered with the blood of the three characters in the scene. The white snow also symbolizes a new page that now involves the epic battle between the oppressive government and the flying daggers. Although it is the end for the main characters: Jin, Leo and Mei, it is a new beginning for the other members of society.

It is also interesting to note how Zhang Yimou often portrays those in leadership positions and especially the government as oppressive and autocratic. In the film *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), the government is depicted as being highly oppressive and tends to rule the society in an autocratic manner. However, there is a glimmer of hope for the society in the form of a rebel group known as the House of Flying Daggers that is portrayed as just and noble and whose main aim is to defend the society from oppression. This is similar to the film *Hero* (2002), where the King is portrayed as authoritative and oppressive. This therefore makes it easy to understand the reason as to why there have been countless attempts to assassinate him. Additionally, the society finds a glimmer of hope in the form of three highly skilled assassins, who are depicted as noble and just and whose purpose is to protect the society at whatever cost. The ambition to rescue the society from the oppressive regime is so great that the three assassins including Nameless were willing to go to great lengths in order to ensure that the oppressive king was slain and that the society was liberated. One of the director with who Yimou Zhang is often compared with is Spielberg. Unlike Spielberg Yimou Zhang, is known for his direct attack on the Chinese government using his films. Spielberg's attack is believed to be

less and not as much as that of Yimou Zhang. For example, Spielberg attacked the government on the Sudan Tragedy due to its continued communism role in the region like other countries that greatly influence the region. However, people argue that he has failed in the recent times as he has become the government's puppet. Therefore, some critics believe that Yimou Zhang is best suited in taking up his roles such as presiding over the directorship of the Olympics (Qiang).

Although some people believe that Spielberg's coverage about humanity in his films is way beyond those of Yimou Zhang, a large percentage still believes in Yimou Zhang. One of the films used by critics to compare Yimou Zhang with Spielberg simplifies a Holocaust covered by Spielberg. The critics argue that Yimou Zhang's Hero and Not One Less are less than Spielberg's films when it comes to plot summary and coverage of humanity's ideals (Qiang).

Yimou Zhang is also compared to Leni Riefenstahl especially because of the two directors' contribution to the Olympics. Leni contributed to the 1936 Olympics that were held in Berlin and there were great hopes that Yimou Zhang would use his role to contribute to the Beijing Olympics in 2008. Many people believe in the role of Yimou Zhang in democratization. Using his films, Yimou Zhang has the capability of making nations including the Chinese government to turn away corruption and decayed capitalism.

Just like Riefenstahl, Yimou Zhang is also praised for his hard work. For example, his film, Hero is believed by many as a film that came from the director's hard work. Therefore, there is no doubt that Yimou Zhang will live to reap the benefits of his hard work at his old age just like Riefenstahl

(Qiang).

Also, through Yimou Zhang hard work, he has not only been nominated to work in the Olympics, but has also been thought by many as suitable for the Minister of Culture post in his country. During such suggestions, people always use Spielberg to compare and contrast Yimou Zhang's capabilities. Most people thought that Spielberg was the most suited to match Riefenstahl. However, such films like Hero and put him on the fore front owing to the earlier discussed feature of sacrifice. Compared to the same director, Yimou Zhang also comes out as being intelligent and having the ability to use logic in his directorship (Qiang).

To sum his abilities in comparison to Spielberg, some people like Wang Shuo, a famous novelist in China has concluded that Yimou Zhang ought to become a minister in the area of Film and Television and Administration of Radio. Those supporting such claims argue that such remarks shows that Yimou Zhang talent is widely recognized and that he is appreciated by many when compared to other directors. This is because working in these ministries is the best proposal to have Yimou Zhang talent at work (Qiang).

In conclusion, we find that although it is possible for the audience to forget the stories in his films years later, it will be impossible to forget the picture. This is according to the amount of effort and expectation that he puts in terms of aesthetics in his films. The red color is one of common themes in films directed by Chinese director Yimou Zhang. This is especially evidenced in his popular films such as Red Dress (The story of Qui Ju), Red Silk, Red Sorghum, and Red Lantern (Raise the Red Lantern). All of these are highly sensuous and symbolic. In particular, he is able to not only focus on the lines

to narrate the story but is able to effectively use color tones in conveying the message and eliciting the appropriate feelings among his audience. The director is able to engage the audience and invoke their mental capacities and imagination in construing the symbolism of the colors used in his films. It is also interesting to note that some of the symbolisms used in his films transcend his Chinese culture and can be understood by people from varying backgrounds including the west and even Africa. In addition, taking into consideration that the director was especially brought up in a highly autocratic regime, it is easy to understand how he tends to portray those in power as oppressive and autocratic. He however believes that oppression is not permanent and its solution lies in the people. It is through noble and just people whose passion is to help those in oppression that a society can be liberated. In contrast to the realistic style that is predominant in the aesthetics employed by western films, the Chinese traditional artistic expression of style, which is highly symbolic, puts much emphasis on the meaning that is implicated behind the presentation.

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