

Close Reading of Two Scenes in the Film *Hero*

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The use of symbolic representation in film engages the viewer to take a closer look and develop a meaningful understanding of what is visually presented on the screen. The 2002 film *Hero*, directed and produced by Zhang Yimou and starred by Jet Li, similarly presents the audience with symbolisms presented through cinematic techniques that lead towards a deeper understanding of the film. It is stated by Turner (2006) that, “Film is not one discrete system of signification, as writing is; film incorporates the separate technologies and discourses of the camera, lighting, editing, set design, and sound – all contributing to the meaning” (p.72). In this context, this paper provides a close reading of two cinematic scenes that share a common symbolic theme: the revelation of hidden knowledge. Film can be a vital educative tool.

Throughout the history of film in China, the government has always considered cinema as an important medium for nationalistic propaganda, along with all other forms of art and literature (Zhang 2012, p.9). This is evidenced in the support that then Prime Minister Jiang Zemin provided to the production of *Hero* by means of logistical support and publicity (Lau 2007, p.5). However, there have been negative reactions among audiences in China about the noble portrayal of the First Emperor as the true hero in the film in spite of his historical notoriety as an extremely tyrannical ruler who soaked the land with the blood of his enemies (Lau 2007, p.5). Despite historical inconsistencies, *Hero* successfully fulfills its role as a medium for nation-building as it incorporates the theme of nationalism through the use of cinematic techniques in camera, lighting, sound, editing, and set design which contributes to the creation of meaning.

Scene One

The scene initially frames the sword of Broken Sword and then uses an arc shot combined with a crane shot which elevates from close-up to high angle in order to present the dimension of the actual set location. Nameless is shown with Broken Sword and Flying Snow in a hall with a bluish hue where Nameless intends to reveal how he can succeed with his plan to assassinate the King of Qin. Inside the hall, the set design shows piled bamboo shells tied neatly together to create some form of a circular wall spanning the size of the hall.

Nameless steps on top of a large, low, circular table in the middle of the hall. With a stomp of his foot on the table, he sends a cup with water high above his head and, in true *shenguai wuxia* fashion that is well-edited, he glides through the air along the circumference of the piled bamboo shells while cutting off the cords tying the shells together. This is presented to the audience via jump cuts or jerky transitions from one frame to the next.

Through excellent editing, Nameless glides back to the center of the table and catches the cup with the blade of his sword before the cup could hit the table; not a drop of water is spilled. Returning to a high-angle camera shot, the entire structure of the circular wall crumbles down in unison, signifying an end to the secrecy of the plan. The diegetic sound of the crumbling shells emphasizes the significance of the moment. The high-angle camera shot combined with the effect of the bluish lighting, shadows, editing, and diegetic sound of the crumbling wall effectively highlights the significance of the revelation made by Nameless.

Scene Two

Using a high-angle shot, a scene shows Broken Sword breaking down the double doors to the rectangular great hall to assassinate the King of Qin. The great hall is fully adorned with light

green silk tapestries flowing rhythmically in the breeze. Combined with the external diegetic sound of the king's roaring army and the extra-diegetic sound of the incidental music, the high-angle shot [in this instance also the establishing shot] gives the audience an impression of the vulnerability of Broken Sword and Flying Snow against thousands of enemies. Contrastingly, a low-angle shot shows the king on top of a flight of steps leading to the throne chair, effectively evoking a sense of supremacy of the king over Broken Sword in the eyes of the viewers.

Utilizing well-positioned lightings, the flowing tapestries in the great hall create shadows as they hang from the ceiling to floor along the large windows, aisles, and around the king's ceremonial chair. Through good editing, Broken Sword glides through the air and uses the tapestries to his advantage by concealing himself and confusing the king, making it difficult for the king to come after him. In this aspect, jump cuts appropriately highlight the confusion that the king must be experiencing, especially with the point-of-view shots that show the king's visual perspective.

However, although Broken Sword is given the opportunity to kill the King of Qin, he changes his mind because he discovers the true character and noble objective of the king merely through his manner of fighting. It is in this context that Lau (2007) posits that "this film portrays martial arts not simply as bodily movements with force to subdue but as an expression of the human spirit" (Lau, 2007 p.6). Broken Sword learns from their swordfight that the King of Qin wants to end all bloodshed between the seven warring states by conquering them all and proclaiming peace throughout the land. No one, not even the court advisors of the king, understands this grand vision of peace and prosperity. It is like a secret that Broken Arrow uncovers bit by bit as the tapestries are slashed one by one throughout the swordfight.

Finally, all the remaining tapestries fall to floor in unison and there is nowhere to hide; everything is revealed. This scene is a symbolic representation of the full ‘unveiling’ of a secret that is uncovered by Broken Sword. Nonetheless, Lau (2007) argues that the film may not be historically accurate in terms of the humanitarian nature of the king (p.10). However, with the refusal of Broken Sword and Nameless to kill the king, the film correctly depicts traditional Chinese teaching which advocates that “true bravery lies not in one’s willingness to fight but in one’s willingness to stop fighting” (Lau 2007, p.10).

In this regard, Teo (2009) argues that “nationalism of *kung fu* heroes and martial arts cinema in general engenders a sense of ‘abstract nationalism’ ... [or] imagined nationalism” that is intended for diasporic audiences to identify with a China that exists only in the imagination (p.65). This means that although there may be historical inaccuracy in the film, it nonetheless inspires a sense of nationalistic pride among all Chinese viewers. In this context, Srinivas (2005) presents the same argument when he states that “the point of course is not whether a viewer has got it all wrong, but [whether] the film works for him/her – even if it is for all the wrong reasons” (p.295).

Conclusion

Although audiences in China may not necessarily agree with the portrayal of the nature of the King of Qin as historically accurate, the film effectively incorporates the required theme of nationalism in Chinese cinema through the heroism of the king, Nameless, and Broken Sword who yearn for peace in a unified country. The cinematographic strategies for camera shots, lighting, sound, editing, and set design in the two scenes having a similar theme undoubtedly contribute to the creation of meaning that eloquently depicts a distinctive cultural work which the present and future generations of China can be truly proud of.

References

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