

Research Article

A Critical Appreciation of the Commercial Blockbusters by Zhang Yimou

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Abstract

It is essential to note that for the past two decades the majority of the Fifth Generation directors have experienced an obvious shift of film-making from art cinema to the production of commercial blockbusters. By means of borrowing Hollywood's "high concept" cinema, the local blockbusters featuring Chinese cultural elements are very emphatic about symbolism and visual effects of productions that are bringing to the audience new and stirring feel. And in the blockbusters of Chinese style, the stardom and renowned directors are the guaranteed success of box office. In terms of thematic subjects, the representative director Zhang Yimou has with certainty showcased his reflections on the unlimited power hierarchy and the impulse to deconstruct it in his works, which contain social and cultural allegories and morality problems of family. The so-called "commercial blockbusters" as *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers* have utilized the unique on-site shooting and color effects to achieve the desired results. At the same time Zhang Yimou has in his art house works benefited from Akira Kurosawa, master of the genre, and some technicalities in gangster film. Zhang's blockbusters of swordsman and Wuxia (martial art) have made an immense box value owing to their tactic violation of the mainstream ideologies. As a result, they are not regularly categorized as the most significant movie of the day. Being Zhang's last blockbuster, *Curse of the Golden Flower* takes advantage of merging spectacular scenes and artificial staging for the purpose of authentic representation and imagination. This is also materialized by his cleverly adapting the original work of fame by Cao Yu, a contemporary playwright. Zhang Yimou's blockbusters, with his special aesthetic, has largely succeeded in an economic sense, but failed ideologically to merge in the mainstream cinema of China.

Keywords

Blockbuster, Zhang Yimou, Theme, Aesthetic, Mainstream

1. Introduction

Like the accomplished baby boomers in the United States, most Fifth Generation directors in China were born in the 1950s and the 1960s. The "Fifth Generation" is so called because they followed the generation of filmmakers who worked after the founding of the republic in 1949. These directors emerged subsequently with the gradual maturation

of the film industry. The Fifth Generation is primarily composed of graduates of the 1982 Director Department of The Beijing Film Academy, including graduates of other departments and film directors who graduated from renowned art colleges in the same period. Prominent figures are Chen Kaige, Li Shaohong, Huang Jianxin, Tian Zhuangzhuang,

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Wu Ziniu, Zhang Jianya, Liu Miaomiao, and Zhou Xiaowen. Among them are Zhang Yimou and Hou Yong from the Cinematography Department, and Feng Xiaoning and He Ping from the art department. The “Fifth Generation Cinema” predominantly refers to the films directed by the aforementioned directors.

The productions of the directors commenced in the early 1980s, with the policy of reform and opening up serving as pivotal factors that significantly influenced the subject matters of their cinematic works. [1] As China’s reform process advanced, the theme of their productions gradually evolved into reflections upon commercial and traditional culture. The industry transitioned from artistic cinematic pursuits toward the creation of commercial cinema. The pioneering approaches of the Fifth Generation engendered films characterized by both new content and innovative style. Their works not only made a significant impact on the domestic film industry but also garnered international acclaim.

The public’s recognition of the Fifth Generation sometimes centers more on the directors than their works. It is the specifically renowned directors with international prominence, such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, that lead movie-goers to the cinema. It can be said that the Fifth Generation ushered in an era of the “director-centered” model in the country. However, critiques regarding the artistic style of the Fifth Generation films have persisted. During the 1980s, as trends of popular culture began to emerge, audiences tended to gravitate toward serious artistic endeavors. This trend continued into the early 1990s, during which Zhang Yimou, a representative of the later stage of the Fifth Generation, began to make his studio works. In content his films exhibit allegorical intention, subtly expressing contemplation and critique of historical traditions through legendary stories. In art form, he employs the avant-garde cinematic language, endowing his films with a intensive sensibility and beauty.

2. Sensory Effects: Pros and Cons

In the era of economic reform, China progressed to the market economy. “To make money is glorious” is the slogan. In 1993, the reform of the film industry was initiated. During this period, the Chinese film market was experiencing a downturn, though art films of several directors of studio rank gained international recognition. [2] Meanwhile, domestic commercial films seemed to lack a clear direction. Zhang Yimou borrowed the methods of “high concept” cinema from Hollywood and made a path-breaking effort of his own. His first swordsmen film, *Hero* (2002) emphasized sensory stimulation and explored the exquisite style of Wuxia (martial arts). In its production, Zhang focused on sensory effects and showcased spectacles captured in real sets as well as film staging. [3] This swordsmen film, a local cinematic genre, has impressed the viewer immensely in terms of exploring how to visually present the poetics of classical culture.

For Zhang, the general sensory refers to photography, mu-

sic and sound, and computer-generated effects in the production of his blockbusters. [4] As this can ensure a higher level of entertainment, Zhang was never tired of emphasizing the employment of color and design, particularly in *Hero* and *Curse of the Golden Flower* (CGF), which exemplify the full advantage of their making though bear certain limitations.

The huge success of *Hero* signifies an advancement in the Chinese film industry, encompassing aspects of production, filming, and distribution efforts. With a box office gross of USD37.5 million, the hit has secured a significant place in the local film history and earned an international fame. Moreover, its foreign market triumph resulted in Zhang Yimou’s third Academy Award nomination. In actual fact, the successful *Hero* rests firstly on its meticulous film planning, astute market positioning, and commercial strategies. Involvement of a constellation of film stars contributes further to its success. Participating figures such as Jet Li, Tony Leung, Maggie Cheung, and Zhang Ziyi, obviously wield considerable influence in Asia, Europe, and the United States. And no less important is the hit’s intricate visual effects further contributing in this regard.

In terms of specialty of shooting, the spectacular combat scenes in the film require little embellishment. Visual techniques, high-speed motion photography is employed to capture sword clashes, soaring water droplets, and dense clusters of arrows. With regard to composition, Zhang had long departed from his earlier compositions, reclining to an application of special effects to craft peculiar and fantastical settings. From the lyrical portrayal of the assassins, it is evident that the film aesthetically pictures the characters without judgment, divorcing from their backgrounds, social classes, and their emotions. In other words, they are merely symbols of swordsmen and “shifting signifiers”. The inadequate characterization of King of Qin constitutes a flaw, hindering audience from a thorough understanding of the theme. As a result, the film has been criticized for glorifying authoritarianism. However, it is believed that the film’s focal point lies in depicting the tragic beauty of the assassins in failure of their mission. This has also led to a pessimistic and extreme emotional expression in the exploration of the sensory-focused commercial genre, [5] unsure of how to confront human ambition and violence. His technique is not solely attributed to his innovative approach to semiotics but also to his understanding of imagery ontology, which has resulted in technical breakthrough in photography and configuration of image. This pursuit embodies both a quest for artistic excellence and box value that offers audiences plenty of appreciative excitement.

Drawing on Tom Gunning’s theory of “cinema of attraction” applied in American musicals, Zhang reinterprets the film history through the lens of early cinema’s spectator-performer relationship. [6] His creative endeavors share some features of film theory of Gunning, particularly in the sequences of martial arts, which stimulates the viewer’s cinematic experience. He also employs “folk spectacle” to

represent the concept of the genre that is different from other films of his, for instance, *Red Sorghum* (RS). In the latter, Zhang introduced the fictitious geographical setting of “Shiliupo”, i.e. sizable red sorghum fields. The film prominently features characters adorned in red cotton-padded jackets, red headscarves, and red belly-bands. These colored elements were primarily employed to serve the narrative of wild romance. The courtyard scenes of *Raise the Red Lantern* (RRL), coupled with the lamp-lighting ritual and Peking opera performance, further exemplify this strategy. In his film *Ju Dou* (JD), through the interplay of light and shadow and the use of vibrant dyes and fabrics within the dye house, the director achieves the pinnacle of visual aesthetics.

While acknowledging Akira Kurosawa, Zhang Yimou also incorporates essential elements from the crime genre. The narrative structure of the film employs a three-act set and excels in scene construction, particularly in the martial arts combat. The three-act structure exhibits an echo to Kurosawa’s *Rashomon*, [7] which represents a pivotal juncture in the dissemination of Japanese modern cinema to the West. Thus the scene set in *Hero* pays tribute to *Ran*. Commentators say if Chinese cinema attempts to gain global recognition, it should not only authentically show its cultural identity but also resonate with audiences of diverse cultural backgrounds. And *Hero* makes a contribution in this regard in spite of that the filmic theme deviates from the dominant culture, [8] rendering it unable to become an art work of in the mainstream cultural context.

The advantageous *Hero* can thus be summarized. Firstly, from Zhang’s personal artistic exploration, he further develops the application of on-site photography, from sorghum fields to chrysanthemum platforms to dye houses to royal palaces. Secondly, the rhythmic tempo and grandiosity created by crowd formations and processions of the military not only astonish the audience but also contribute to Gunning’s “cinema of attraction.” [9] Thirdly, Zhang Yimou adeptly amalgamates classical cultural symbols with martial arts, infusing the latter’s innovative choreography into his works. This includes scenes of combat in the water and the air, flashback as well as physical confrontations enacted through mental visualization.

3. Genre Fusion in Wuxia Film

Following *Hero*, Director Zhang capitalized on the momentum by directing *House of Flying Daggers* (HFD), a martial arts work of conventional nature. While the film performed well in international markets, it was generally perceived as formulaic, with less dynamic characterization and resonance. However, it is fair to remark that the characterization and plot are not insufficient, and the narrative merits on clarity for expressing the theme of pursuing ideals and lamenting over loss of love. In *Hero*, the martial arts tends to disconnect from character conflicts, primarily serving to align with the visual scenes and spectacle imagery. In con-

trast, the combat sequences in *House of Flying Daggers* (HFD) are grounded in characters’ positions and identities, adhering closely to the genre conventions of martial arts.

The film’s most prominent attribute remains to be its utilization of cinematography, particularly evident in Zhang Yimou’s mastery of color effects. For instance, he harmonizes the verdant hues of the bamboo groves with the green attire of the flying daggers factions, suggesting an artificial wonder. As both flying daggers and arrows are capable of long-range attacking, the characters are subjected to incessant ambushes during their escape, inducing thereby a continual sense of tension for the audience. For Zhang, it is common that his Wuxia films extensively employ high-speed photography to vividly portray the trajectory of flying blades and arrows, forming a signature visual display. Furthermore, the film incorporates numerous close-up shots of characters. This approach serves a dual purpose. One is to showcase the visages of idolized stars as part of the cinematic spectacles. The other, due to the concealed identities of the characters, is to signify an exploration into their inner worlds. However, constrained by its commercialization, the film tends to lean toward aesthetics at the cost of thematic significance.

Other shortcomings of HFD lie in the rudimentary treatment of identity reversals within the narrative. For instance, the undercover role of Officer Liu should have subtly been hinted at. His relationship with Xiao Mei and how it impacts their actions and decisions are inadequately addressed. The film fails to establish a coherent backstory for the antagonistic dynamic between the flying daggers factions and the government, resulting in characters existing within an unconvincing “reality space.” Generally, Zhang’s films of the genre have consistently emphasized location selecting and a penchant for pristine set designs, which contributes to a sense of spatial enclosure. This, in turn, may diminish realism of his work, to a great extent.

Among his earlier works, such as *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou*, Zhang has already excelled in realist cinema. [10] It changes, however, in HFD. Specifically, the scenes are overly abstract, and the dancing and drumming sequences are entirely relied on montage editing, rendering the spectacle of martial arts and dancing almost a fantasy. The omission of authentic depictions of societal and historical settings results in its thin narration. In this regard, his attempted remedy involves layering the “police-undercover” element atop the martial arts genre, but the problem lies in potentially cluttering the plot, which may affect the depiction of characters’ inner worlds and overwhelm the audience. As a matter of fact martial arts cinema is a unique genre in the country, but it does not strictly adhere to the genre conventions, giving rise to issues like blending and the absence of definite genre patterning. HFD is an amalgamation of Wuxia genre, adopting the dual spy setup from police film and incorporating cultural allegory to express the director’s personal perspectives of society and history. This, combined with a legendary style, can not only enrich the theme of humanism but

also propel advancement in cinema technology, as showcased clearly in Zhang's innovative directing of his cinematic works above mentioned.

4. An Ultimate Blockbuster

In his final blockbuster, *Curse of the Golden Flower* (CGF), Zhang Yimou aimed to enhance the audience's comprehension of his intention by adapting the masterpiece of the renowned playwright Cao Yu (1910-1996). This most popular film can be considered the epitome of blockbusters and symbolizes the crest of the wave of commercial cinema before its relative decline. As the film is adapted from a theatrical classic, and the adaptation is not entirely of commercial consideration but a source of narration. [11] Some scholars suggest that the primary concern is related to the reinterpretation of dramatic elements. It is believed that the filmmaker extracts characters' relationships from theatrical classics without considering the narrative tactics of cinema. This is particularly critical given that Chinese cinema originates from the unified "dramatic poetry" tradition, which is rooted in the convention of shadow play. [12] One can even extend this perspective to the concept of ancient poetry as a lyrical form of expression.

In CGF, Zhang set out to realize a unique visual spectacular by combining opulent sets with ornate costumes. A quintessential example of this approach is the real-life enactment of the chrysanthemum feast corresponding to Huang Chao's poetic lines of antiquity. Unlike the excessive use of visual technology in *Hero*, the film refrains from utilizing a whole set of supplementary devices. [13] What should be affirmed is Zhang's innovation of a distinctive style for this particular piece, though his efforts in exploring visual ideals elsewhere should also be acknowledged. In *Red Sorghum* (RS), Zhang has maintained a commitment to the material realism of cinema while pursuing the integrity of the real and imagery. Nevertheless, the sumptuousness of royal mansion, the bodies of palace maids, and the extravagance of chrysanthemum-strewn environs all overtly point to the blatant display of authority. In addition, the presence of the black-clad army, their shields with silver-white glows in darkness juxtaposed with the chrysanthemums and blood, is remarkably unusual. This approach is also employed for exhibiting the army scenes in *Hero*.

Despite the film's aesthetic beauty, the critique of violence and hegemonic power and its inherent nature remains. CGF continued the tradition of visualization, yet faced challenges with lackluster overseas box office overseas and unfavorable domestic reception due to its narrative weaknesses and clumsy storytelling. The narrative concern lies in the superficiality of character development. The original work, *Thunderstorm* by Cao Yu, presented inter-generational and class conflicts, both of which are interdependent. The film amalgamates similar conflicts under the overarching theme of the King's insatiable desires, leading him to forsake his empress

and perpetrate violent acts against his own family. These scenes of violence and patricide lack emotional resonance with the audience as they require a more intricate psychological setup. The film's climax should have centered on character revelations rather than violence. A perceptive critic keenly observed Zhang Yimou's emphasis on familial relationships in his films. [14] The script writer seizes this from the source material for an extensively development. Towards the end of the film, where the prince takes his own life and the royal lineages dwindle into extinction, it appears to be an attempt to create a satirical twist, symbolizing the futility of the Monarch.

The central narrative of CGF revolves around the Queen's victimization and plot to overthrow the King, with the King already being aware of the scheme. The power imbalance between the two sides ensures the Queen's inevitable failure, rendering the outcome devoid of suspense. The only virtuous and loyal character, Prince Jie, commits suicide, contributing to the film's prevailing somber and pessimistic tone. The critical appraisal of "hollow" for this work does not stem from the grandeur of the setting or the complexity of attire but arises from the incongruity between characters and their surroundings. [15] While the film pushes creative boundaries in its form, its underlying theme remains rooted in a specific historical context. The issue lies in the transition from an early phase of artistic experimentation where retelling history could offer forward-looking spiritual power, to a later mode where historical themes are transformed into normal allegorical reflections on power, resulting in increasingly cryptic subject matter that eludes broad interpretation. CGF serves as an example of this issue as it fails to reconcile the obsession with the aesthetics of violence inherent in everyday life, impacting the theme of power criticism in the country of its making. With this understanding one needs to realize that utilizing spectacles not only represents an aesthetic choice but also functions as a remedy for the narrative weaknesses.

5. Conclusion

It is objective to note that Fifth Generation directors are unstoppable, with their commercial blockbusters being exhibited from time to time. Zhang Yimou's creative journey can thus be delineated. On the one hand, he continues the tradition of cultural allegory by crafting unique visual spectacles. On the other hand, he progresses toward realism, emphasizing narrative fluency and emotional feedback from the viewing public. If his legendary approach is a manifestation of his life philosophy, its limitations will become evident in his pictures with an attempt to substitute his own expression with an interrogation of socio-political orientation of the day. Collectively these constitute a central strategy in his production of commercial blockbusters, hoping to meet up with the expectations of cinema-goers. While some Fifth Generation filmmakers have retained a political edge, Zhang Yimou's

blockbusters of Chinese characteristics endeavor to detach from the theme of more weighty criticisms, or rather, they face challenges in integrating distinctive personal views with more universal themes. Audiences find it difficult to discern the core value conveyed by his works. One can discern that the peripheral perspective in his works creates a sense of detachment when focusing on palaces or aristocratic life, and results in an artificial and detached situation. Yet, when he represents powerful individuals, the pictures inevitably resort to the influence of authoritarianism to accentuate the contrast, fabricating a dramatic tension. His employing spectacles serves as both an aesthetic choice and a remediation for narrative weakness. In summary, the blockbusters by Zhang Yimou ultimately evolve into poignant expression of human suffering, but rarely providing a resolution and lacking the gravitas of tragedy. Consequently, audiences experience considerable emotional suppression, which may reasonably be seen as a factor contributing to the negative reviews about his filmic works.

Abbreviations

CGF	Curse of the Golden Flower
RS	Red Sorghum
RRL	Raise the Red Lantern
JD	Ju Dou
HFD	House of Flying Daggers

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Author Contributions

Zhang Qianyu is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest for this academic article.

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- [8] See Raymond Williams' discussion on the three phases of cultural development, namely, "the residual, the dominant, the emerging" in "Culture Is Ordinary" in *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, Verso, 1998, p. 77.
- [9] In Tom Gunning's concept of "cinema of attraction," a significant exemplification can be found in the choreography and editing of musicals, while in Zhang Yimou's films, the collective rituals resonate closely to music playing and dancing.
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