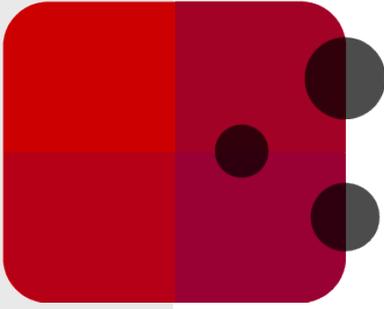


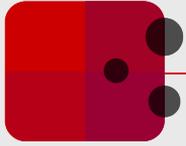
rebecca



Color in the Epic Film:
Alexander and Hero

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Resumo

A tecnologia e o *design* de cores são algumas das principais características do gênero épico e estão presentes nele desde o surgimento dos épicos italianos da década de 10, colorizados e feitos com estêncil. Elas representam uma trajetória reta de inovação formal que vai desde as primeiras iterações dos filmes épicos às sinfonias de cor que vemos hoje. A importância da cor no filme épico tem sido, contudo, ignorada. Neste artigo eu argumento que o *design* de cor escapa ao entendimento comum sobre a forma épica como sendo conservadora, centrada no nacional e comandada pelo que Gilles Deleuze denomina um horizonte crítico e ético. Alexandre e Herói são épicos recentes que se apresentam como casos exemplares: em cada um o *design* de cores articula mensagens que permitem uma nova maneira de entender os próprios trabalhos e iluminam sobre o uso das cores na longa história do gênero épico.

Palavras-chave

Cor, Épico, *Alexandre*, Zhang Yimou.



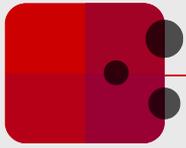
Abstract

A key feature of the epic genre since the appearance of the tinted and stenciled Italian epics of the 1910's, color technology and design constitutes a direct line of formal innovation that extends from the earliest iterations of the epic film to the exalted color symphonies of the present. The significance of color in the epic, however, has largely been ignored. In this essay, I argue that color design complicates the traditional understanding of epic form as a conservative, nation-centric genre, governed by what Gilles Deleuze calls a critical-ethical horizon. The recent epics *Alexander* and *Hero* provide a case in point: in each film, color design articulates a range of messages that provide a new way of understanding these works, and that illuminate the use of color in the long history of the epic genre.²

Keywords

Color, Epic, *Alexander*, Zhang Yimou

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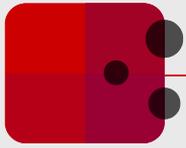


Charged with symbolic meaning and laden with cultural associations, color is one of the emblematic devices of the epic film, conveying stylized messages of sexuality, race, and power in ways that sometimes overwrite the genre's ostensible themes. A key feature of the genre since the appearance of the tinted and stenciled Italian epics of the 1910's, color technology and design constitutes a direct line of formal innovation that extends from the earliest iterations of the genre to the exalted color symphonies of the present. The significance of color in the epic, however, has largely been ignored. Although chromatic design communicates emotion, cultural value, and technological sophistication, it has to date been discussed in very limited ways – as if the aesthetic language of color in epic film were superfluous or incidental, having little to do with the deeper meanings and pleasures of the form.

When we consider the unusual persistence and importance of color throughout the history of the epic genre, the absence of critical discussion is even more noteworthy. Although the striking chromatic values of early film history -- the majority of films were tinted, stenciled, or toned in multiple vivid hues -- were actively suppressed from about 1908, color remained an expressive and significant feature of epic form.³ Associated most immediately with prestige, exoticism, and the projection of cultural and cinematic achievement, the chromatic features of the epic film also helped shape the large thematic questions of the genre – the conflicts between barbarism and civilization, carnality and reason, masculine and feminine.

The recent appearance of critical works that consider the cultural significance of color in painting, literature, and film may provide a new way of approaching

3. The intense emotion associated with color was thought to work against the goals of narrative absorption and moral uplift, and was actively dialed down during the second early period from about 1908 onwards so that color would not distract from narrative meaning. Joshua Yumibe provides an excellent study of this process in *Moving Color*: “The attempt to subdue color during this period also registers a genuine alarm at the sensual effect of color on the spectator. The supposedly black-and-white, American style of Biograph ... and the significance of light tints and tones ... can be thought of as an effort to keep color in its place, in the background subservient to narration.” (121-122)



the subject of color in the epic film. In this essay, I consider Oliver Stones' *Alexander* (2005) and Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2003) as films that bring several new perspectives into frame. I argue that color design in both films provides something like a subversive counterpoint, an internal critical commentary. Counterposing the narrative patterning that dominates these films -- the rise and fall of the hero, the unfolding of a heroic destiny -- color asserts a kind of alternative vision of history, centered on the triumph of emotion and desire, a message conveyed in sensual form. The formal articulation of these messages, moreover, expressed in the films' vivid chromatic designs, conveys an overtone message that contrasts with the overarching "critical-ethical" horizon of epic form.⁴ In *Alexander*, for example, the florid tints and hues long associated with barbarism, carnality, and the feminine seem to surge from the screen to challenge and reorder the color pallet traditionally associated with classical civilization. In *Hero*, similarly, the exorbitantly colored memory sequences, rendered in intense red, green, blue and white, are juxtaposed to the sober discourse of sacrifice and martyrdom for national unification that dominates the present-tense sequences, rendered in muted tones of black and grey. The lavish coloration of these memory scenes, most of which emphasize female knights, or the "nuxia pian," might be read as a kind of alternative history to the film's ostensible message of individual sacrifice for collective purpose. By highlighting the role of color as a symbol of cultural meaning, both films bring the seeming ephemera, the ornamental and the decorative dimension of epic film, the colors of costume and the symbolism of set design into thematic focus.

In a provocative study of the ideological encoding of color in Western art and theory, David Batchelor writes that color is understood as "the mythical, savage state out of which civilization, the nobility of the human spirit, slowly, heroically,

4. Gilles Deleuze, in *Cinema 1*, considers the epic in terms of the monumental, the antiquarian, and what he calls the critical-ethical horizons: "Finally, the monumental and antiquarian conceptions of history would not come together so well without the ethical image which measures and organizes them both ... The ancient or recent past must submit to trial, go to court, in order to disclose what it is that produces decadence and what it is that produces new life; what the ferments of decadence and the germs of new life are, the orgy and the sign of the cross, the omnipotence of the rich and the misery of the poor." (pp 150-151).



has lifted itself.” (BATCHELOR, 2000: 23) Moreover, he writes that “Colour is often close to the body and never far from sexuality, be it heterosexual or homosexual. When sex comes into the story, colour tends to come with it.” (BATCHELOR, 2000: 63) The history of the epic film would seem to bear this out. Among the innumerable associations of savagery, sex and color in epic films – and the corresponding absence of color to depict the noble realm of a higher spiritual plane -- I will cite here only two or three of the most ready examples. In *Gladiator* (2000) Maximus’s body is drizzled with blood as he descends for the first time into the underworld of the arena. “Red is the color of the gods,” his fellow gladiator informs him, “you are in their favor.” (Figure 1) Maximus’ long travail as a gladiator is marked by increasingly vivid color cinematography, highlighted by the golden sand of the Colosseum, the gleam of armor, the dazzling white, red, and purple of the décor. The barbaric richness of Maximus’s life among the mongrel nation of gladiators, the subalterns of the empire, is in striking contrast to his frequent flash forwards to the mystic land of Elysium, which appears initially as a grey wall with a gate, and later as an idealized landscape from which most color has been drained. Elysium, in the film’s chromatic scheme, is painted in faded, muted tones, lightly tinted with blue. The afterlife -- the location of Maximus’s long awaited reunion with his wife and son – is curiously pictured here in almost dismal colors, an enfeebled pallet that has a twilight gloom about it, perhaps to signify a kind of elevation or transcendence from the fleshly realm. (Figure 2)



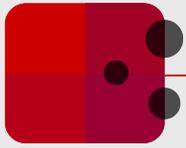
Figure 1: *Gladiator*. Dir. Ridley Scott. By David Franzoni, John Logan and William Nicholson. Scott Free Productions, 2000.



Figure 2: *Gladiator*. Dir. Ridley Scott. By David Franzoni, John Logan and William Nicholson. Scott Free Productions, 2000.

Similarly, in *Ben-Hur* (1959) the hero's sojourn in Imperial Rome and in Palestine unfolds as a kaleidoscope of colors. Rugs, tapestries, and costumed characters abound, as Ben-Hur's Roman benefactor offers him a noble lineage and the riches that go with it, and his Arab benefactor offers him the opportunity to drive his horses in the Circus. Ben-Hur's visit in the Arab tent is replete with the trappings of luxury, a spectacle of saturated color, providing an emphatic shorthand for the delights of the Eastern world. At the film's conclusion, however, as the crucifixion and death of Christ unfolds, the film shifts chromatic keys dramatically, darkening the sky, muting the set in greys and blues, clothing Ben-Hur, his sister, and his mother in drab cloth. The release of Ben-Hur's family from the curse of leprosy, and the symbolic redemption of the world that is suggested here with a lightning bolt, is rendered by flooding the screen with the red of Christ's blood, and then, oddly, constraining the color, reducing the pallet, suppressing the chromatic range to brown, gray, and shadow, a decisive subduing of the vitality and energy communicated in the film's earlier scenes.

Perhaps the most striking example of the cultural messages embedded in color in the epic film can be found in recent Chinese epics, a genre in which striking hues are dominant. In the extraordinary films *Hero*, *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), and *Red Cliff* (2008), for example, color defines cultural values that are strongly

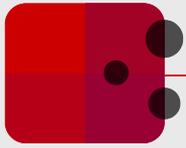


associated with aesthetic traditions of painting, theater, and philosophy. The design intensive mise en scene featured in these films foregrounds color almost as a kind of metalanguage, registering both nation and historical tradition as well as communicating what Batchelor calls an “ahistorical, extra-linguistic, sensual embrace ... that ravishing intimation of paradise.” (p. 79) (Figure 3) Taking on a specifically art cinema quality, the epic here can be characterized explicitly as a color genre, one in which the rich pallet, the sumptuous display of a series of enameled frames functions as an aesthetic language that is overpowering and seductive, and that often works in counterpoint to themes of duty and sacrifice. Rather than a threatening state of savagery, color here signifies the meeting place of national feeling and aesthetic form.



Figure 3: Hero. Dir. Zhang Yimou. By Feng Li, Bin Wang and Zhang Yimou. Sil-Metropole Organization, 2002.

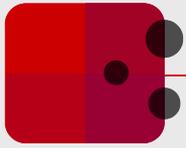
In Oliver Stone’s *Alexander*, the eponymous hero embraces the alternative modes of life symbolized by color, adopting the colors and clothing of the East in order to embody in his person the antinomies of ancient and modern, masculine and feminine, West and East. Painting his face, costuming himself in a lion headdress, adopting the ornamental style of the East, *Alexander* conveys a very different heroic narrative of the Macedonian conqueror than what we might expect, bringing to light the virtual narrative immanent in the story, a possible world of absorption and crossing over. In this regard, the film can be read as a sustained reconsideration of one of the central tropes of epic film. Typically, the



epic hero gains the authority, the mandate to complete his quest only after becoming one with the multitude, falling into slavery, becoming a nomad, drawing from the multitude a sense of purpose and nobility. Forced into a period of wandering, exile, and nomadism, the hero in many epics becomes one with the mongrel and subaltern worlds -- a crucial motif in films such as *The Ten Commandments* (1956), *Spartacus* (1960), and *Ben-Hur*. The encounter with the refugee and the dispossessed, the slave and the subaltern, provides the hero with strength of purpose; by becoming a nomad, the character discovers his true course.

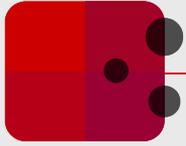
In *Alexander*, however, the radical dissolution of boundaries and the incorporation of the other become the entire point and purpose of the hero's narrative, a theme that is conveyed most effectively through color. Rejecting the world of Macedonia, a domain riven by hierarchy, jealousy and rivalry, Alexander embraces the "barbaric" styles of Babylon and India, a theme rendered emphatically in the changing color schemes of the film, with its most elaborate sequences of chromatic invention occurring in scenes that are set in explicit contrast with Macedonia. The film juxtaposes three major color movements defining the three principal settings of the film: Macedonia, Babylon, and India. Each communicates a set of messages through color, messages that are underlined and amplified by juxtaposition. Cutting from Macedonia to Babylon, and from India to Macedonia, Stone constructs a kind of intellectual montage of color contrasts that augments and to some extent shapes the larger messages of the film.

The cinematographer for the film, Rodrigo Prieto, has discussed the use of colored filters in *Alexander*, and stated in an interview that Stone wanted the Macedonia sequences to have a pellucid, "innocent" look filled with primary colors. (BOSELY, 2004: 3) Indeed, the diurnal, exterior scenes set in Macedonia are exceptionally crisp compositions, almost abstract in their bleached clarity. The



“innocence” that Stone wishes to achieve, however, is deceptive; the whiteness of the Macedonian scenes seems to me to be aggressively white, as Batchelor says, “There is a kind of white that is more than white . . . that [doesn’t] really admit the presence of other worlds. Or it [does] so grudgingly, resentfully, and absolutely without compassion.” (2000: 10) The transparent air of Macedonia, without viscosity or weight, produces whiteness not as the innocent mark of a new world, but as the sign of a civilization that Alexander must cast off, a civilization that, as Batchelor writes, “did its work on everything around it, and nothing escaped.” (2000: 10)

The cave scene in Pella is exemplary. After brilliantly taming the wild stallion Bucephalus, the boy Alexander is ushered to the caves by his father, who instructs him on the duties of kingship and the costs of pride and ambition. Archaic illustrations on the walls, nearly monochromatic, are incised in black silhouette on dull stone, illustrating the fates of Prometheus, Oedipus, Heracles, and Achilles, heroes whose ambition, Phillip asserts, offended the gods. The dialogue here is of overreaching and punishment, and the color scheme is a muted, burnt shade that is drained of all luster. The one color that stands out, illuminated by Philip’s torch, is the red of the heroes’ blood seemingly flowing down the rock. Although these illustrations are not based on the artistic forms of the known historical past, but rather are inventions on Stone’s part, they serve a distinct narrative and symbolic role, setting Philip in the position of an intimate but also in the role of punisher of youthful ambition. It is not by accident, it seems to me, that the first illustration Philip explicates in this scene is a primitive drawing of Prometheus being attacked by the eagle, a scene illuminated by Philip’s flaming torch thrust tellingly toward the wall painting as he describes Prometheus’ fate. Here the world of the mythic past is reduced to two colors, and two emotions – ambition and suffering. Deeply ambivalent, the scene begins as Philip’s introduction into the hard responsibilities of kingship and the sacrifices it entails, but ends with Alexander proclaiming his determination, to his father’s unease, to one day appear upon this wall, to challenge the gods and

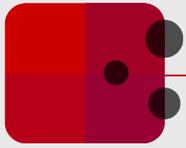


have his name proclaimed among the greats. As Oliver Stone writes about the wall paintings in this scene, “In that cave in Pella, Philip brings the full weight of his Greek classical pessimism to bear on his son’s idealism . . . This one-eyed Cyclops brings us back to the archaic age of Titans and Olympians when fathers ate their sons, and sons murdered their fathers, and committed incest with their mothers . . . He implies that the human race, as in tales of the Garden of Eden, is cursed from its inception.” (p. 343)

In striking contrast, the sequence of Alexander’s entry into Babylon is depicted as a cornucopia of color, movement, and blissful sensation. Dazzling blues, greens, pinks, and whites greet the hero, lavishly dressed Babylonians offer tributes of jewels and gold, floral petals of pink and white rain down upon the hero. As Ptolemy says in voice over, “At this one glorious moment in time, Alexander was loved, by all.” (Figure 4) With the scene overflowing with color, as Batchelor reminds us, sex can’t be far behind. Once he arrives at Darius’ palace, Alexander and his men discover the harem, a study in styles of physical beauty, with men, women, and eunuchs seemingly equally dispersed among the swaying multitude. Here, Alexander is introduced to Bagoas, in a scene that condenses sexual freedom with the freedom from constraint implied by color.



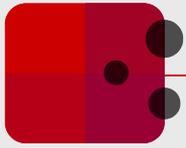
Figure 4: *Alexander Revisited*. Dir. Oliver Stone. Warner Bros., 2007



Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones has written a lengthy and critical analysis of the harem sequence in *Alexander*, describing it as an Orientalist fantasy, a negative judgment with which Stone concurs. (in Cartledge and Greenland) The long tradition of Orientalist projections in art, literature, and film centering on harem sequences, from Delacroix and Ingres to D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916) -- which Stone screened for his production team -- is more or less summarized in Stone's admittedly retrograde treatment. Nevertheless, the specific dimension of color serves here to communicate a larger meaning. In an essay on Giotto's color style, Julia Kristeva associates color with escape, "colour escapes censorship;" through color, the subject escapes its alienation. (BATCHELOR, 2000: 82) (Figure 5) Alexander's "escape" from Macedonia is registered, I argue, as an escape into color. Cutting directly from the dark foretellings in the cave at Pella to the plenary earthly delights in Babylon, Alexander as conqueror also reveals a nobility of mind and spirit, offering freedom to all of Darius's slaves and preserving the noble status and position of Darius's sister. Here, color enlarges the character; far from being coded as savage, it is a sign of civilization -- the older, more magnificent civilization of Babylon that Philip never saw, and that Alexander and Hephaestian both admire. It speaks, as Batchelor writes, "of nobility." (2000: 55)



Figure 5: Alexander Revisited. Dir. Oliver Stone. Warner Bros., 2007



The death scene of Philip, rendered in the primary, “innocent” colors Prieto describes, serves as the core of Stone’s drama and establishes the conundrum that plagues Alexander throughout his life. In the detailed commentary Stone makes about the film, he writes that the murder of Philip casts suspicion on both Alexander and on Olympias. Crediting Joanna Paul with keen insight into the “single action” of narrative called for by Aristotle, Stone remarks that “the theme, the main action of this piece was always murder – the murder of Philip – and whether Alexander was involved or not.” And further, “Is he complicit because of his mother’s hate? Can he bring her to justice, as Orestes did his mother? What a horrible twist of fate to have to choose between matricide and patricide . . . And because of this dishonorable desire in himself for power at any price, we are suggesting that Alexander will always feel complicit.” (in Cartledge and Greenland, 350)

The scene unfolds in the clear light of the Mediterranean afternoon, in lightness and clarity. It is vivid color, however, that organizes and shapes our perception of the sequence. From the very first glance, the spectator is put on the alert: the whites are too white; the red of Olympias’s shift is too red; the primary, saturated colors are so intense they function almost as a series of caution signs, shouted warnings, a mood reinforced by the near toppling of the god statue that Philip erects to himself. As Philip prepares to celebrate his victory over the Greeks by staging a tribute to himself, a celebration that takes place in a theatre, Alexander asks to stay by his side, as if he has a premonition. Philip rejects his offer, accusing Alexander of political motivations, and sends him out of frame. But as Philip steps into the anteroom of the theatre, the shadows of the room engulf him, and the scene shades to black. When he emerges from the anteroom into the main arena, Olympias, clothed in scarlet, is situated in the center of the frame. (Figure 6) Philip raises his arms, and the camera follows, providing a brief shot of sky and then a blinding image of the sun that seems to wash all color from the frame. As a young soldier approaches to begin the honors, clothed in



a scarlet cape, he kisses Philip on the lips; the scene then cuts to Alexander, who now remembers the soldier as a youth, a young man who Philip had allowed to be abused. The man breaks off the kiss, spits on Philip, and runs him through with his sword, with the red of his assassin's cape nearly blotting out the scene.



Figure 6: Alexander Revisited. Dir. Oliver Stone. Warner Bros., 2007

For the spectator, the violence of the scene is already foreshadowed and encoded in the color imagery. The black and white frames that bracket Philip's murder, the wild red of Olympias' costume and the assassin's cloak, the bleached backdrop of the theatre and the garish colors of the statues of the gods: the color details stand out as a kind of visual punctuation against the chalk white of the amphitheater. And as Philip steps into the dark cave of the anteroom, it recalls the cave scene at Pella, where dark and light cohabit. The color that has historically been dialed back in narrative films, seen either as a distraction or as a spectacle that would lead the viewer's attention away from the loftier goals of narrative, goes underground in epic films, and reappears in scenes of violence or sex.

The summit of the film's color design is in the use of color infrared film stock in the massive battle scene set in India. With the Macedonian cavalry ranged against Indian elephants in a dense forest, the battle turns against Alexander's



troops. He charges directly in to wage single combat against the Indian king riding on an elephant. In the words of Oliver Stone, “Alexander’s action is a classic heroic sacrifice, meant to motivate his lagging men into action – as was historically true at the battle of Multan, when this suicidal heroism in fact turned the tide of battle in favor of the Greeks, but led to Alexander’s most grievous wound.” (in Cartledge and Greenland, 350) He is cut down with an arrow to the chest, and falls from his horse. Directly after his fall the film shifts chromatic keys, shading to bright, voluptuous red. At various points in this sequence, color overwhelms form entirely; reddish hues flood the screen, coloring the sky, the leaves of the trees, the flesh and armor of the human figures. Blood appears yellow. Here, in some shots, differentiated mass and volume almost disappear; the distinction between surface and depth, near and far, positive and negative space nearly evaporates. (Figure 7) The operatic intensification of color, form, and movement, with the shots alternating between frantic montage and long, slowed, stylized movement is reinforced by the sound track, which combines an orchestral accompaniment of tragic power with the sounds of human struggle in battle.



Figure 7: *Alexander Revisited*. Dir. Oliver Stone. Warner Bros., 2007



Rodrigo Prieto says about this scene that “in the ecstasies of near-death, Alexander might see things that aren’t normally visible to the eye, and in turn, the Macedonians might see things in him they hadn’t seen before . . . perhaps in a moment of enhanced perception, you can “see” the invisible and understand another reality.” (BOSELY, 2004: 2) Roland Barthes writes, “If I were a painter, I should paint only colours: this field seems to me freed of both the Law . . . and Nature.” (BATCHELOR, 2000: 55) The quotes, like the sequence, are revealing. The “ecstasy” of Alexander, in Prieto’s view, is expressed in color, free of what Barthes calls the Law, and also free of Nature, of photography’s supposed ontological responsibility to imitate nature. In this scene the film pushes through both narrative convention and pictorial form to give free rein to the colorist, fauvist impulse, an expression of primary emotion.

The expressive, primal dimensions of epic form, so often buried in the linear order of narrative, can be found, I have argued, in the color, in the violence, and in the vertiginous camera movements that depart from convention – from the law and from nature – and that express the deepest messages embedded in the genre. Vivian Sobchack has written of the “surge and splendor” of epic form as reproducing a sense of the spectator’s “being in history,” of experiencing the sweep, majesty, and sense of meaningfulness that historical experience confers. (1990: 37) I would like to take this one step further and describe the surge and splendor of epic form as a primary experience of somatic empathy, of emotional arousal concentrated in form, in the phantasmagoria of color and movement which serves here as an emotional container of meaning. (BURGOYNE, 2008: 93-94)



Hero (2003)

In Zhang Yimou's *Hero*, the use of color as an emotional container of meaning is perhaps even more pronounced than in *Alexander*. The primary conflict of the film, which centers on the opposition between unity and freedom, is explicitly displaced from the narrative structure to the color register; in other words, displaced from the "core" of the film to the surface, coded into expressions of hue, shade, and saturation. Primarily a director of surfaces, Zhang, in the words of Rey Chow, shifts attention away from message to the form of the utterance: "meaning," she writes . . . is displaced onto the level of surface exchange. Such a displacement has the effect of emptying "meaning" from the conventional space – the core, the depth, or the inside . . . and reconstructing it in a new locus, the locus of the surface, which not only shines but "glosses," which looks, stares, and speaks." (2000: 389)

In this essay, Chow traces and describes a deep-seated cultural hierarchy in Chinese philosophy based on oppositions of surface and depth, shallowness and profundity. The filmmaker Zhang, although renowned for his color cinematography in films like *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), *House of Flying Daggers*, and *Hero* and for his ethnographic appropriation of the artifacts and surfaces of the past, has often been labeled a superficial director, an artist whose visual flair sacrifices depth for surface design, alluring cinematography, and not least, fetishistic images of women. Chow argues that critiques of Zhang, however, mostly reiterate the traditional hierarchy of surface and depth in Chinese culture, and are thus folded into a conservative, traditional stance that regards visual brilliance, arresting images, and surface style with suspicion.

To my mind, the analysis she provides can be compared to the suspicions regarding vivid color in the West -- what Batchelor calls the "chromophobia" that characterizes Western philosophy and aesthetics. Vibrant color, as Batchelor writes, is associated with instinct and barbarism, but also with a kind of



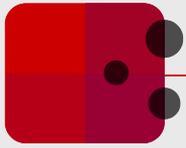
infantile shallowness. Restricted and subdued in early film in favor of narrative absorption and aesthetic uplift, and further restricted directly after the transition to Technicolor, vivid color in Western film has historically been regarded with suspicion, and as a distraction from the depths of narrative content. And in critical reactions to the work of Zhang, it appears a comparable “chromophobia” persists in a contemporary Chinese context.

The suspicions concerning Zhang as a superficial, sensational director extended, for some critics, to the narrative content of *Hero* as well. *Hero* has been critically condemned for its seeming acceptance of totalitarian rule, its apparent endorsement of the sacrifice of the individual for the sake of unity.⁵ The treatment of the first emperor of China as a figure of enlightenment in the film has proven particularly problematic, as the historical figure is known in history as a tyrant who insisted on conformity. Critical debate over *Hero* has been polarized, ranging from condemnation for its seeming support of despotism, to a keen appreciation of its use of Chinese idioms – martial arts, music, calligraphy and painting – to fashion an international art house success, using the traditional forms of Chinese culture to attract a global audience. (LAU, 2007) (Figure 8)



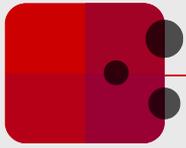
Figure 8: *Hero*. Dir. Zhang Yimou. By Feng Li, Bin Wang and Zhang Yimou. Sil-Metropole Organization, 2002.

5. As Ian Christie once said to me in conversation regarding *Hero*, “Leni Riefenstahl would have wept!”



In my view, however, the film's extraordinary color design invites us to consider an altogether different reading of the work, and to shift our focus from the narrative of sacrifice and conformity to the utopianizing effect of cinematic aesthetics. As I have argued elsewhere, the magnifications of scale, the virtuosity of special effects, the detonations of violence, and especially, the climaxes of color so characteristic of epic film create what Sobchack calls a "carnal experience of history in film." (1990: 24) Reading *Hero* in this light, as a carnal experience of history accessed through color and movement, provides a way of understanding the film that overwrites the ostensible narrative message of unity over freedom.

Set in the Qin dynasty of 2200 years ago, the framing story concerns a Chinese king who sets out to unite China's warring states. A possible assassin, Nameless, has been granted an audience with the king because of his claim that he has slain three of the king's sworn enemies, the legendary fighters Sky, Broken Sword, and Flying Snow. The king asks Nameless to tell the story of his conquests, and to provide proof of his valor, as he is dubious that Nameless could be so skilled as to defeat all three. Nameless narrates the stories of his various encounters with the three warriors, each of which is expressed in a different color, after which the king narrates his own version of what happened based on what he knows of the protagonists. The principal colors of the narrations are white, red, blue, and green. The film's cinematographer Christopher Doyle provides a brief allegorical reading of the color scheme, essentially trying to deflect more elaborate interpretations of the "meaning" of the color narrations, which he says has been overdone: "White," he writes, represents the "truer sequence, and we chose red to suggest that passion has a different truth." (2003: 33) And "like the West, from Aristotle to Newton, Chinese conceptual systems associate color with elements, objects, parts of the body and sounds. . . I guess someone deserves a Ph.D. if he applies all of those concepts to *Hero*. As far as I'm concerned, these colors are nothing more or less than what they are." (p. 33)



In this essay, Doyle seems to dismiss the idea of symbolic correspondences between the colors of the scenes and any larger philosophical tradition or specific coded meaning. Rejecting the notion of an iconography of color, which would reduce the sensual style of the film to a conventionalized program, the cinematographer insists that the color values of the film are not reducible to an external system of symbolic expression. While I sympathize with Doyle's impatience with any kind programmatic reading, I am not convinced that the color design of *Hero* is simply a ravishing form of spectacular imagery devoid of semiotic importance. Rosalind Galt's recent work on the ornamental and the decorative in film, for example, has shown how the cosmetic surfaces of cinematic form serve expressive purposes that are often ignored or suppressed in critical analysis and evaluation. Indeed, it seems to me that Zhang's powerful use of color throughout his oeuvre might be read as a key device in his work, with vivid color serving paradoxically as kind of camouflage or concealment, or perhaps better, a kind of masquerade. I will elaborate this point in the paragraphs below.

First, however, I would like to consider the film's use of color in terms of epic form. Derek Elley's definition of epic as a work that "transfigures the accomplishments of the past into an inspirational entertainment for the present, trading on received ideas of a continuing national or cultural consciousness" seems relevant here. (1984: 13) Moreover, the distinguishing formal characteristics of the film, its color design, its use of martial arts, and its choreography, can be compared, I believe, to the central characteristics of epic cinema as set forth by Gilles Deleuze. Describing the epic film in terms of three horizons or perspectives -- the monumental, the antiquarian, and the critical-ethical -- Deleuze writes about the antiquarian aspects of epic form in ways that resonate with Zhang's films: "Antiquarian history must reconstitute the forms which are habitual to the epoch: wars and confrontations. . . actions and intimate customs, vast tapestries, clothes, finery, machines, weapons or tools, jewels, private objects."

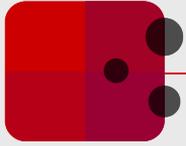


The antiquarian horizon includes what he calls the “colour-image” in epic film, where fabrics become a fundamental design element: “In *Samson and Delilah* . . . the display of cloth by the merchant and Samson’s theft of the thirty tunics, constitute the two peaks of colour.” (1986: 150) In *Hero*, the antiquarian and the monumental aspect of epic are plainly visible in the exotic mise en scene and in the elaborate choreographies of the duels. Where the film departs from and deepens the coded characteristics of epic, however, is in its rethinking -- as in Stone’s *Alexander* -- of the critical-ethical horizon, the key dimension of epic form for Deleuze, the dimension that “supervises and organizes” the rest. (1986: 150-151) (Figure 9)



Figure 9: *Hero*. Dir. Zhang Yimou. By Feng Li, Bin Wang and Zhang Yimou. Sil-Metropole Organization, 2002.

The critical-ethical horizon, I suggest, is articulated in the stories of the female knights, which are rendered in the exquisite color sequences for which the film is famous. The film’s use of the traditional narrative - folkloric form of the *wuxia pian*, or wandering knights-errant, is instructive -- for this traditional form also include stories of female knights, or the *nuxia pian*. (LAU, 2007) With the female knights Flying Snow and Moon carrying central importance, and the male character Nameless the serving as the primary narrator of the framing

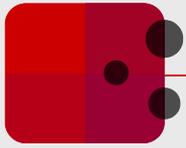


story, the film combines the two narrative traditions. And in the scenes featuring female knights, exorbitant color and movement reign. Here the film foregrounds the connection between emotional truth and a different kind of historical truth. In its emphasis on the *nuxia pian*, and in the elaborate orchestration of colour frequencies associated with the female knights, *Hero* presents a fascinating variation on typical epic themes, variations that are particularly interesting in light of Zhang Yimou's oeuvre. I suggest that the stories of the *nuxia* in *Hero*, and by extension, the stories of several of the female protagonists in Zhang's films, may be read as coded representations of Zhang's authorial perspective, channelled and to some degree disguised in the female knights. (Figure 10)



Figure 10: *Hero*. Dir. Zhang Yimou. By Feng Li, Bin Wang and Zhang Yimou. Sil-Metropole Organization, 2002.

The framing story of the male “hero” Nameless, by contrast, narrated in the present tense, unfolds with Nameless and the king seated in static poses in the king's chambers, a scene that is returned to several times in the course of the story. The framing scene is rendered in somber colors of burnished black and shadow, with the only chromatic accent consisting of an array of candles and a large scroll bearing the crimson character for “sword.” And color is all but excluded from the first duel that features two male knights, Nameless and the warrior Sky. Set in a chess house, a kind of open air pavilion with rain falling

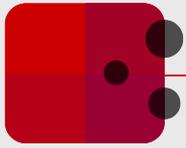


onto the chessboards, the floor, and onto the warriors, the duel is filmed in what is nearly a black and white pallet, with only the subtlest tints of color. Although this episode is defined by dramatic movement and sound, and is choreographed in the expressive, weightless style we have come to associate with Asian martial arts films, color has been almost entirely drained from the scene.

Perhaps the contrast between the peaks of color associated with the female knights and the subdued colour pallet in the scenes that feature male characters -- and that foreground self sacrifice in the name of an authoritarian collectivity -- can be read as a coded protest, a symbolic form of resistance. The conflict between “unity” and “freedom” that structures the film’s ostensible theme might be summarized not in the film’s narrative progress but rather in the languages of emotion that pervade the film’s color design -- in the opposition of the menacing black-clad armies and faceless masses of the king’s nation versus the spectacular chromatic worlds associated with the *nuxia pian*. The film’s surface design might then be read politically, with brilliant color serving as a paradoxical form of camouflage, a masquerade that conveys messages of freedom and desire through the stylized registers of cinematic form. (Figure 11)



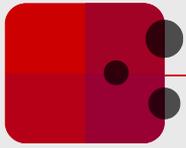
Figure 11: *Hero*. Dir. Zhang Yimou. By Feng Li, Bin Wang and Zhang Yimou. Sil-Metropole Organization, 2002.



Conclusion

Color has begun to be addressed in film studies in ways that have illuminated the history of the medium in new ways. Far from being a rare and specialized technology, various color techniques were applied to film from the very earliest period of filmmaking, indeed, from the medium's inception. Recent studies have also traced the broad implications of color strategies in film, its role in shaping discourses of national identity, and its importance in framing narratives of modernity. Resistance to color, however, has also been a prominent characteristic of Western modernity, as competing claims of social authority and cultural taste have often coalesced around color as an emotional language, one that moves spectators along a continuum that includes sensual excitement and moral refinement.

In this essay, I have considered color in film from the perspective of genre studies, exploring the epic film as a case study. Vivid chromatic design has been a prominent feature of the epic from the first iterations of the genre form. Yet color has been nearly ignored in critical discussions. By analyzing the color schemes of two exemplary works of film color design, I have tried to show how the thematic and narrative registers of these two films is complicated and enriched by codes of color. Often considered simply as spectacle or as merely decorative, color asserts itself in these works as a primary strategy for rendering character, articulating plot, and ultimately, for linking the historical past with ongoing critical and ethical issues in the present. ■



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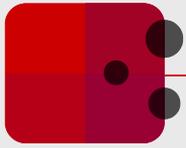
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