

Zhang Yimou: great master of color

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ABSTRACT

As a pioneer of Chinese cinema, Zhang Yimou, has directed a number of films spanning various historical periods, genres and techniques, but if there is a style or technique that really defines him, this is the skillful, symbolic and communicative use of color. Many critics claim that red is the color that voluntarily characterizes his films, but he himself tells how this distinctive preference of his first films was due to the environment in which he grew up in Northern China, in which red for centuries has not only been the bearer of meanings, but also a cultural heritage, a representative sign of a past to be rediscovered and preserved. In fact, many aspects of the culture of this great country converge in red and in the term that translates it, so much so as to be a metaphor for customs, traditions and feelings. In this research we have tried to go beyond this cliché by taking into consideration the whole of his film production. We analyzed five films: two wuxia (a narrative genre, typical of Chinese cinema, which mixes martial arts with fantastic and adventurous elements), the first Hero (2002), where the color of the clothes, draperies and sets changes according to the unfolding of the story and the last, Shadow (2018), in which the color belongs directly to the set design and costumes, and which brings us back to the black and white painting that inspired generations of Chinese writers. Then we analyzed three other historical-social films, Red Sorghum (1987), Ju Dou (1990) and Raise the Red Lantern (1991) which represent Chinese society in the 1920s and 1930s. In the analysis of these films we have been able to identify three different ways of using color: one narrative, one symbolic and one that we can define as historical-aesthetic.

KEYWORDS China, cinema, communication, art

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1. Introduction

Zhang Yimou director, screenwriter and cinematographer of many of his movies is perhaps the most important director in contemporary China. His training passed through Mao's cultural revolution, which saw him working first in the countryside and then in a textile company, to arrive, after Deng Xiaoping's reform, at the Beijing Film Academy in the photography department. After collaborating with several directors as camera operator, set photographer and actor, he made his directorial debut with the movie *Red Sorghum* (1987) and became part of that large group of filmmakers defined as fifth generation.

As a pioneer of Chinese movie making, he has directed a multitude of films spanning various historical periods and genres, but if there is one style or technique that defines him, which connotes his works and is part of his poetic journey, it is the particular artistic, symbolic and communicative use of color: a tool that has always been used in traditional Chinese theater to communicate situations, personalities, feelings, both in the courtly and popular culture, as well as in communist China with new meanings and new representations.

A paradigmatic example and covered in every aspect in many of Zhang Yimou's movies is the red color: in the past a precious dye obtained from cinnabar and since the time of the Song dynasties used to color the seals placed by the literati on painting and calligraphy works. Later it was the color of the revolution, of the red flags, of the little red book, and last but not least of the 'red sun', which is still the symbol of Mao.

We like to think that the director uses it to sign, as if with a seal, many of his works, even if he himself says that this color is simply that of the traditional culture in which he was born, a cultural heritage of northern China where he grew up and a representative sign of a past to be rediscovered and preserved.

In this research we have considered the three movies with a social-historical character (*Red Sorghum* 1987, *Ju Dou* 1990, *Red Lanterns* 1991) that tell the story of China in the 1920s and 1930s and two wuxia¹ films, the first and the last: *Hero* (2002) and *Shadow* (2018). Looking at the work as a whole, we identified three different ways of using color: symbolic, narrative and aesthetic.

2. The symbolic color

Many commentators claim that red is the hallmark of Zhang Yimou's movies. In the works we have chosen to see and that describe a period that takes into consideration the 1920s and 1930s of Chinese history,

red is indeed one of the main protagonists. In red we find a symbolic and communicative complexity linked to the millennial history of this country, a history that is part of the tradition, beliefs and collective imagination. We have analyzed the various aspects of red in three movies, two of which also carry this color in their titles: *Red Sorghum*, *Ju Dou*, and *Red Lanterns*.

These three movies are known to critics as the "Red Trilogy, both because they share the predominant use of this color in a palette reminiscent of that of ancient China where red and yellow and gray dominated imperial and popular culture, and because of a common concern for national identity, political engagement, and the human and natural landscape.

"The dominant red of these movies has a double significant value: if for the Western audience it becomes the main stylistic feature of the author... for the Chinese it constitutes the occasion to recover, perhaps unconsciously, a heritage of symbols originally present in their own culture but later lost" (Colamartino and Dalla Gassa, 2003) and the reds illuminate the screen, capturing the attention in the traditional silk dress of the Chinese bride, draped inside the sedan while the conjugal procession crosses the fields, in *Red Sorghum*; they become dramatic in *Ju Dou* where, in the dyehouse, strokes of fabric from yellow to red unfold before the eyes of the spectator like strokes of paint on a canvas; and they permeate every scene of *Red Lanterns*, lighting up on the gray of the courtyard and becoming claustrophobic in the interiors.

2.1 *Red Sorghum* (1988)

"*Red Sorghum* is one of the most important movies of the Fifth Generation for several reasons: it is the first Chinese film to win a prestigious award, the Golden Bear in Berlin in 1988." (Colamartino and Dalla Gassa, 2003). It tells the story of the young and beautiful *Nine Flowers* sold as a bride to the old leper, owner of a red sorghum distillery and her love affair with the young *Yu*, whom she marries after the death of her husband and with whom she has a son; the plot takes place against the backdrop of the Japanese invasion of the '30s and will see *Nine Flowers* heroically fight for her country and die. Red, the color that speaks of the immutability of the spirit and of Chinese tradition, marks the opening scene of the film where the young bride is seated in a sedan chair covered with a fluttering fabric of this color and marks the end, where a solar eclipse accentuates the tragic dimension and red spreads across the screen.

In the initial phases, intense red is used in the traditional sense, as a color linked to marriage, luck, love and wealth: red is the sedan chair, red is the dress of *Nine Flowers*, an intense red that occupies the scenes of the

wedding, wanting to hide the unhappiness of the bride and capturing the attention and the gaze of the viewer. A red that runs through the tragedy of the sold woman and with which Zhang Yimou launches the social denunciation of a period that the revolution has now left behind. Behind this color lies the tragic fate of many women anchored to the customs of a feudal society where red, from a symbol of love and happiness, became a sign of male power.

In this color, so rich in shades and meanings, tragedy, violence, sin and war also unfold: when Japanese troops invade China, including the village where *Nine Flowers* lives, she will organize the resistance, dying for the freedom of her country in an apotheosis of warm and dramatic orange and red tones.

In this movie the symbolism of red is clear: on the one hand it underlines revolutionary commitment and on the other hand passion and love. By presenting itself in a recurring way - dress, liquor, fire, blood - it captures and guides the attention of the spectator.

2.2 *Ju Dou*

Also in this movie, the director denounces the medieval custom of buying wives. *Ju Dou* is the wife bought by *Jinshan*, an old and impotent dyer, and she engages in a romance with *Tianqing*, a nephew of her master who works as an apprentice in the dye shop and with whom she has a son. The movie is set in a rural textile mill.

Throughout the movie, *Ju Dou* and *Tianqing* are oppressed by *Jinshan*'s tyrannical, suffocating, and vigilant behavior, and even after his death, *Ju Dou* and *Tianqing* cannot live as they wish because they struggle to appease cultural expectations and hide their illicit relationship. The movie ends in an extremely dramatic way: *Tianqing* is murdered by their own son and *Ju Dou* kills herself by burning the mill around her.

In this movie red recalls its very archetypes: blood and fire. With blood it shares the sense of life in the most intense and transgressive parts of sex and death, with fire that of purification and destruction. It is the red dye poured into the dyeing tub that heralds the final drama of the death of two of the male performers pushed and drowned in that tub, one almost by accident and the other by revenge; both *Ju Dou*'s husband and her lover lose their lives in this colored water. It is a red that marks loss: loss of purity during the sex scenes, loss of honor, loss of husband and lover, loss of the murderous son, and marks the unfolding of the drama by accompanying the viewer, as in *Red Sorghum*, in the red light of the expiatory fire.

Once again, color becomes a fundamental element of the story, underlining its emotional phases: from purple

red to golden yellow in the clandestine relationship, turning into dark and livid tones in the tragic finale, a single color presented in different shades to portray passion, jealousy, revenge and 'crime'.

2.3 *Red Lanterns (1991)*

In this movie, the last of the trilogy, which earned Zhang Yimou the Silver Lion at Cannes, the director once again puts the Eastern patriarchal order under indictment. The setting is pre-revolutionary China, and the theme is the relationship between sexes.

The story takes place in the 1920s and is about the young and beautiful *Songlian* who is forced to abandon her studies due to the death of her father and marry *Chen*, a rich landowner who already has three wives. The plot takes place inside the gray and cold courtyard on which the doors of the rooms of the concubines and that of the owner open. The only colorful element is the red of the lanterns that are lit near the door of the concubine with whom the man decides to spend the night. The women compete for exclusivity over the husband and a fierce rivalry arises that results in a bitter ending. (Moviestruckers, 2017). *Songlian*, in order to gain her husband's favor, lies about being pregnant and when she is discovered, after a series of dramas, she goes crazy. The lighting of the lanterns is a sign of status for the concubines because whoever wins her husband's favor receives an elaborate foot massage and the right to decide the menu for the entire family the following day. It is therefore the red of the lit lanterns or the black of the drapes that cover them to mark the moments of the tragedy, and it is always a radiant red light, diffused in the rooms together with the furnishings and the clothes of this color to mark the desire, the love and the tragic destiny of the protagonist, a red symbol of wealth, dominion, power, sex that in the denunciation becomes also a symbol of oppression.

2.4 *Red in the trilogy*

In these three movies, red defies any narrow interpretation, because it indicates both a rejection of tradition and its heritage. It is no longer a celebratory color as in ancient China or revolutionary as in modern China, it could be described as a state of mind, as a feeling. As *Zhang Yimou* once said, "We Chinese have been too moderate, too reserved... the boundless red of sorghum fields arouses sensory excitement... it encourages the joy of living." (Gateward, 2001).

In his movies, red becomes the primary color of life and in the course of the events of the trilogy it becomes a commemoration of freedom, exuberance and the most primitive and natural desires and aspirations.

3. Narrative color: Hero (2002)

Hero is the first wuxia film made by Zhang Yimou in 2002. The story takes place in China in the historical period called 'of the Fighting Kingdoms'. Indeed, the Chinese territory was divided into seven kingdoms that fought for supremacy, the most powerful of which was the kingdom of Qin. The plot, simple and complex at the same time, is based on the true story of Jing Ke (Nameless) a swordsman who prepared for ten years to kill the king of Qin (227 BC).

In the movie Jing Ke is *Nameless*, an unknown swordsman who one day presents himself to the king of Qin saying that he has succeeded in killing all those who plotted against his life.

Nameless refers to *Sky*, an assassin, unbeatable with a spear, to *Flying Snow*, a woman and a skilled swordsman whose family was exterminated by the king, and to her lover *Broken Sword*, an extraordinary master both in swordsmanship and in the art of calligraphy. However, during the story, the king realizes that *Nameless* is deceiving him and that this was a way to get close to him and kill him.

The complexity comes from the director's choice to narrate the events seen from different angles with different levels of truth, so that the audience can learn about facts and characters from different standpoints. A choice made by other directors before him, such as Quentin Tarantino and Akira Kurosawa, but what makes this choice different, unusual and original is the use of color. Indeed, it is the color of the scenes, of the clothes, of the furnishings, in which the characters act that marks the unfolding of the narration in a discontinuous continuity that leads from deception to truth.

The story relies on flashbacks, wonderful pieces of dazzling colors that involve the viewers and guide them into the complexity and ambiguity of the events. Black, red, blue, white and green are the five colors chosen by the director to mark the timings and to identify with immediacy the direction of the story: colors that also involuntarily expand their allegorical dimension and influence the perception of time that in the red seems to flow faster, while in the blue, despite the action, it becomes slower and contemplative.

The author, in the interviews following the film's release, excluded that he wanted to use color in its symbolic dimension and that he had given it more simply the task of separating and unifying the story in an immediate, easy, safe and aesthetically involving way, so as to guide the spectator across the film's complex plot. In reality, given the intrinsic characteristic of color to express universal meanings and emotions deriving from its

archetype, we can observe how the chromatic alternations are in harmony with the contents of the story. Different colors to represent the inner worlds and situations of the different characters. Because in *Hero* there is everything: love, hate, revenge, resentment, art, gracefulness, elegance and violence.

Black is the color that marks the beginning. Black are the palace, the garments of *Nameless*, the soldiers' armor, the king's dress; a black emphasized by the fixity of the image with the main character at the center of the scene. And black concludes the movie, a hard, contracted black that promotes an aesthetic of cold-blooded, fearless death. Between these two blacks the colors of the story unfold.

Red marks jealousy, betrayal, revenge, love and passion, and pride among the fighters that unleashes a centrifugal force underscored by the flight of leaves and flying sand that permeates the scene. It is the fire of jealousy that will bring death to the swordsmen.

The blue following the red shows us the story as seen from a different angle. In this color it is the outdoor space that dominates the action and gives the scene a sense of calmness and serenity emphasized by the camera that slowly follows the movements of the swordsmen and emphasizes the lightness of their clothes and the air.

White, color of mourning, death, but also of purity wants to assert the actual innocence of the swordsmen: in ancient times in China it was thought that a change of dynasty was not a mistake, but it was necessary when an emperor did not rule according to the Confucian rules of good governance. In this way, the end of a dynasty preluded to a new and better life for the empire.

When the story is colored with green, the feeling is that this color is the most suitable to describe the feeling of peace and joy that breathes in the hearts of the second and third swordsmen. In addition to marking the final change in the story, this shade of green reminiscent of jade, for the Chinese since ancient times a rare material with esoteric virtues, symbolically reveals victory over death. Nameless dies, but he will be given the solemn funeral that is usually arranged for heroes: the promise and guarantee of a long life in the memory.

4. Aesthetic color: Shadow (2018)

Based on the *Novel of the Three Kingdoms*, a classic of Chinese literature, *Shadow* tells the story of an ambitious king determined to regain a part of the kingdom and his great general, Commander *Zi Yu*, a visionary man driven by the desire to win, but forced, since he lacks the strength, to use a double to fight in his place: his shadow,

a peasant who resembles the commander and replaces him when necessary and with whom he also shares his wife, but not the nuptial bed. Both characters are played by *Deng Chao*. The plot is complex, full of intrigue and references, dominated by the sign and metaphor of yin and yang, the two opposing principles that involve, in addition to motion and stillness, a long series of contrasting elements: light and darkness, hot and cold, expansion and cohesion, evolution and involution, activity and rest, life and death, male and female (Luzzatto, 2019) whose image is proposed in more than one occasion to narrate the light and "shadows" of the protagonists.

"The main theme is that of the double: the original and its shadow, the true and the false, but also the masculine and the feminine. A game of pairs that is extraordinarily marked on a chromatic level by black and white, with the photography of *Zhao Xiaoding* that almost exclusively uses shades of gray" (Balsamo, 2018). The story unfolds in the beginning in a measured and dare I say guarded way to then accelerate with dramatic contours in the final in a claustrophobic landscape where rain continues to pour down. We are a long way from the masterful colors of *Hero*: the fiery reds, the tranquil blues, the purifying whites... In this movie the palette uses the many shades of gray between a sometimes dazzling white and a deep black, turning also to 'colored grays', those shades that carry the memory of a hue. After the first scenes, the colors sneak in, they are those of the skin, the dark red of blood, the memory of the green of the vegetation... the characters live, plot, attack, defend themselves and die, in incredible varieties of a sometimes unnerving gray - a choice that the director claims to have been inspired by Chinese brush painting, the one that *Shitao*, a painter and poet who lived during the *Qing* dynasty (1642/1707), wrote about: "The one stroke carries within the totality of beings. The stroke receives the ink, the ink receives the brush, the brush receives the pulse, the pulse receives the spirit." (Shitao, 2008) (Luzzatto, 2019 page 77). A monochrome painting obtained from the dilution of black ink, by which generations of artists-literates have been inspired, submitting themselves to a strenuous spiritual exercise aimed at recreating the cosmic and natural order where "everything is in relation and where the One, the void, the creative power that contains everything, becomes Two originating the pair Yin (black) and Yang (white): the opposite and complementary movements that enable every form of life and according to which reality is expresses itself" (Luzzatto, 2019).

So in this work of his maturity *Zhang Yimou*, who has always looked to the aesthetic-symbolic tradition of his country, deeply anchored in its ancient history and in the Confucian and Daoist tradition, tried his hand at the

artistic tradition deriving from Buddhism, painting the scenes with a meticulous and monochromatic choice of places, environments and furnishings and with masterful framing, camera movements and photography. The *yin/yang* symbol often appears on the ground during filming and refers to its philosophical complexity: it is a fighting arena for the commander and his shadow, it is the preparation of the shadow that, in order to train for the fight, takes possession of the feminine side of his lover, making his own the axiom that nothing can be completely *yin* or completely *yang* because both contain the seed of their opposite. There are many references, especially in the landscape, to the scrolls of the ancient masters with the contours of the hills that emerge from the mist, the pouring rain and the dark tones of a gray that turns to black sometimes emerging from an intense white, like ink on white paper. The feeling is that the events take place in a darkness that from the rainy exterior spreads to the interior like an immense shadow. The eye gets lost in the formal and chromatic refinement, which is not absence, but reduction and follows the unfolding of the representation as in the ancient paintings painted on vertical scrolls that were hung on the wall and whose vision was accomplished slowly in their unfolding, as a succession of images on the screen.

For a general discussion of the topics covered in this article (Zehou, 2004).

5. Conflict of interest declaration

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7. Authors Short Biography

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Essayist, publicist and chromatic consultant. Professor of Color Theory in university faculties, she participates and organizes seminars and courses in Italy and abroad. She is the author of numerous historical and educational books on color, an interest that she started from the lessons of Luigi Veronesi at the Brera Academy of Fine Arts.

Laura Del Zoppo

Graduated from the Brera Academy of Fine Arts, she is a director and art director. She has made numerous broadcasts and commercials for various television networks. She has had teaching positions in several private academies in the history of contemporary art and fashion show production courses.

Notes

- [1] With wuxia we mean a narrative genre, typical of Chinese cinema, which mixes martial arts with fantastic and adventurous elements.

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