

House of Flying Daggers/ Shi mian mai fu

(2004, Zhang Yimou, China & Hong Kong)

Component 2: Global Filmmaking Perspectives (AL)

Core Study Areas: Key Elements of Film Form Meaning & Response The Contexts of Film

Rationale for study

House of Flying Daggers is a Chinese *wuxia*/martial arts film, featuring the genre elements of spectacular fighting, breath-taking acrobatics and exotic fantasy. It combines these with a tragic triangular love story and a narrative where nothing is as it first appears.

STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences and timings/links

The Echo Game - Blind Mei dances for Leo 0:10:55 - 0:18:40

Bamboo Fight - Mei and Jin are attacked by Government soldiers 1:05:10 - 1:08:03

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography

- Film as spectacle, the “look” of the film is of paramount importance. Cinematographer Zhao Xiaoding’s use of the wide screen to dramatic effect. The plot twists and turns but, like those of most operas, plot points are the devices that take the spectator from one gorgeous scene to another.
- Exotic interior of the Peony Pavilion: high key lighting, sumptuous colour. Whip pans follow the beans as they hit the drums, high angle shots show the pattern of Mei’s dance.
- Bamboo forest, green filter, high angle shots of swaying bamboo, soldiers. Sweeping, whirling,

fast tracking movements follow the daggers.

Mise-en-Scène

- Emphasis on production values, visually beautiful settings and costumes, elaborate film set create the fantasy. Peony Pavilion rich, exotic ancient China. Beautiful, extravagant Tang Dynasty costumes, authentic detail of interiors props, musical instruments. Costumes by Emi Wada, a Japanese designer who has worked for director Akira Kurosawa.
- Landscapes bamboo forests, birch forests, meadows and fields with mountain ranges in the background. Green forests, red and gold autumn leaves in the meadows, white snow provide the setting for the emotion and the imagination of the film.
- Dramatic effect through visual imagery, colour and composition. Highly stylised choreography of fight scenes.

Editing

- Mei’s dance intercuts long shot of her performing in the circle with a closer shot of the drummers outside the circle. Movement of beans towards drums, close up of faces.
- Use of CGI to follow swift trajectory of daggers.
- In the bamboo forest cuts between vertical and horizontal above ground swaying soldiers, ground level traps.

Sound

- Mei at the beginning is portrayed as blind; sounds serve as a clue to her understanding. Peony Pavilion echo game sounds used to emphasise her reliance on them. Tension, excitement, chattering of women, drumming, slapping, silence.
- Action scenes, action emphasised by sounds of bamboo fronds, counterpoint of flying daggers, whoosh of bamboo spears, clash of bamboo poles. Also sounds of flying bamboos, falling leaves, sound of sword cutting the air - Mei’s perception of the fight.

- Music by Shigeni Umebayashi mostly low register: cello, drums. Women's voices used towards conclusion of action scenes, action not signalled by music which acts as a commentary at the conclusion.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS - Meaning & Response

Representations

- In Peking Opera all roles originally played by men. Strong female characters central to the tradition of *wuxia*. They fight with swords and take part in combat. In the Flying Daggers the leaders are now women. Mei demonstrates female sexual power.
- Representation of China. Zhang Yimou has called cinema “*an excellent channel for promoting China's culture*” with “*cultural and historical information*” for Western audiences. However he has been accused of “selling Oriental exoticism” and received criticism that his version of China “*feeds his Western audience's image of exotic, primitive, timeless China*”.
- Male and female passion is subject to tradition and duty. Male characters are “Just pawns on the chessboard”. The concluding fight to the death between Leo and Jin is about honour as well as jealousy.

Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including visual style, influences, auteur, motifs)

- Mandarin title of the film translates as ‘*Ambushed from Ten Directions*’. Motif of multiple deceptions, false identities, nothing is as it first appears: Leo appears to be an imperial soldier but is really a mole, the former lover of Mei; Mei a rebel pretending to be a courtesan, pretending to be blind; Nia appears to be the madam of the Peony Pavilion, then the leader of the Flying Daggers, then only pretending to be the leader; Jin is an Imperial soldier who pretends to be a rebel.
- *Wuxia pian*: *Wu*=martial + *xia* = chivalrous. Origins of the *Wuxia pian* genre are to be found in North Chinese Mandarin culture after the 9th century. Rival warlords ruled China and unattached swordsmen could be hired as killers, heroes who followed codes of honour and chivalry defending the helpless against corrupt leaders and officials. Swords, magic, fantasy and the supernatural are central to *wuxia* mythology.

Today this is a highly popular fiction in Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore.

- The director, Zhang Yimou is a household name in China, responsible not only for films but for the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics of 2008, also for huge open air spectacles such as the *Impression Lie Sanji Show* held on the banks of the Li River featuring more than 600 amateur performers. A graduate of the Beijing Film Academy, one of the so called ‘5th generation filmmakers’ he began as a cinematographer and moved on to directing films about Chinese life, particularly that of women. *House of Flying Daggers* is his second action film.

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS - Contexts

Social

- China the most populated country of over 1.381 billion, and the world's second largest state.

Historical

- During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1978) the Beijing Film Academy closed, hardly any films were made. The Academy reopened in 1978. For 10 years the teachers there had not had any students. They did want to resume teaching in the old way, which, against the new styles emerging from Hong Kong and elsewhere now appeared old fashioned. Like their counterparts in other cinemas they wanted to experiment. In 1982 the first academy students since the reopening graduated. These were the so-called “5th Generation” and included Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou. The 5th generation had been through the hardships and upheavals of the Cultural Revolution. Their reaction was to make “exploratory films” that would examine issues so far unexplored in Chinese cinema. The Fifth Generation became the first Chinese film-makers to achieve fame and become widely known outside China. China was the subject of their films, although very different view of China than the socialist realism of Mao before the Cultural Revolution.

Political

- After the Cultural Revolution foreign films were imported to supply cinemas. Discussions were held concerning artistic freedom. Zhang's earlier films were often criticised by the government for their treatment of the realities of social life in China. Since then he has enjoyed huge

success with his *wuxia* films, example of global or transnational cinema's demand for ethnic cultural elements and lustrous visuals. "Exotic" and "arty" China, popular with audiences.

Technological

- Use of CGI and digital effects and wire work enhance acrobatics and fantasy.

Institutional

- Half the world's films are produced on the continent of Asia. India, Japan, Thailand, South Korea and the 3 Chinese cinemas of Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan all have large film industries. Success of Chinese global film

making. The "home" audience for these films is potentially huge; cinema-goers in the region spend millions per year on cinema tickets. The industry has invested in digital cinema and the revival of Chinese language films.