

The film *Hero* provides an excellent base for semiotic analyses and visual structuralism to investigate the culturally derived intended and oppositional meanings, particularly the hero myth relating to rhetoric and discourse in a visual culture, specifically the international themes portrayed.

Audiences may not notice all the rhetoric and discourse in visual culture, but it seems everyone has an opinion about it – how it works, how it doesn't work; how it ought to work and how it refers to the world. The infusion of the innovative within the familiar in *Hero* invokes a special pleasure. *Hero* never directly addresses the viewer, but draws the spectator into an expertly constructed and amazingly beautiful world with great success.

"When we watch a film we forget about our own everyday life, our world, and carefully follow the events in the dramatic world of the characters...Films do not only tell stories about film, they can also focus on the filmic discourse as such-they draw the attention of the spectator to the filmic codes, e.g. camera angle, montages, color...at any moment we are aware that the two worlds, the two realities are distinct and separated," states Gloria Withalm, professor and co-editor of the *European Journal for Semiotic Studies*.

These seemingly infinite possibilities can be simplified, or at least organized, but when viewing a film from a different culture, interpretations can only go so far, especially when analyzing different views of the film's core meaning – the hero myth. These multiple combinations of meaning, or double articulation, are explained as the "meaning of a sign is not in its relationship to other signs within the language, but rather in the

social context of its use,” states Daniel Chandler, author and lecturer in the department of Theatre, Film and Television Studies at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth.

An audience can't know everything about a certain film or culture, but the more they do understand, the deeper the meaning. Not everyone can afford a trip to China, but films, like other discourses and technologies, have become a notable medium for experiencing important meanings and ideologies.

Consider the following three positions presented by Stuart Hall:

1. Dominant-hegemonic reading - identify with the hegemonic position and receive the dominant message of an image or text (such as a television show) in an unquestioning manner.

E.g. The Qin king is a tyrannical leader.

2. Negotiated reading - negotiate an interpretation from the image and its dominant meanings.

E.g. The Qin king was previously conveyed as a tyrannical leader, but now audiences see some of the reasoning behind his actions.

3. Oppositional reading - they can take an oppositional position, either by completely

disagreeing with the ideological position embodied in an image or rejecting it altogether (for example by ignoring it).

E.g. The Qin king is neither a tyrant nor reforming leader.

Authors William Rothman and Marian Keane state, "The projected world is separated from reality by the fact, and only the fact, that it does not exist (now)...The projected world does not differ from reality." The Qin King is a real Chinese historical figure, but that doesn't mean the audience will always read him as fact.

Sovereign ruler might describe the Qin king in *Hero*, while others might have a more oppressive view of the king if other codes and conventions appeared. His appearance, speech and behavior alone might not be enough to consider his actions tyrannical.

Flashbacks or sequences representing Qin soldiers hurting individual Chinese people through the king's orders might have reinforced this point and strengthened the emotion behind Nameless' mission and the heroic theme of "don't let bad things happen to good people." In *Hero*, most of the oppression occurs in a group setting (except for Nameless' sword staged battle), most notably the arrow attack on a neighboring city as its inhabitants practice calligraphy.

### *Characters*

All the actors portray their characters well within the film environment. The main character, Nameless, played by Jet Li, drives the main narrative in his discussions with

the Qin King, the most powerful man in China. Nameless tells the Qin King the tales of how he single-handedly defeated three assassins that threatened the Qin kingdom – Sky, Broken Sword and Flying Snow.

These five main characters convey most of the meaning throughout the film, though a minor character named Moon, played by Zhang Ziyi, a subordinate of Broken Sword's, seems to embody the character the most similar to the audience because her status equals to a regular citizen. For example, when Nameless fails his mission to kill the Qin King, the subsequent death of Broken Sword and suicide of Flying Snow makes Moon react with shock and sadness as she runs towards them. The spiritual meanings that lead up to this point and the couple's love make the audience care for the characters even without Moon acting as a conduit to seemingly elicit more response from the audience.

### *Narrative leads to modality*

The narrative, provides the map for the audience to find the hero myth meaning within this film. Consider these three significant areas of meaning from *Hero*:

#### 1. Denotation (what — the literal meaning)

Nameless has great martial arts skills signified in flashbacks and the Qin King's reaction to his stories ("how swift thy sword"). Nameless also wears the Qin band around his head signifying his apparent residence in the Qin kingdom.

The denotation of group vs. individual is also apparent. In a blue colored sequence, when Nameless fights Flying Snow, distance (showing characters in a wide shot) can decrease their individuality, because, from a distance, audiences can not discern their individual features.

Close up camera shots are used when Nameless must plead with the surrounding army to fight Flying Snow, thus moving one step closer to their ultimate mission. When the audience sees the close up shots, such as Flying Snow telling Nameless to draw his sword and his impending hesitancy, their movements and facial gestures create more impact and feeling.

## 2. Connotation (how - viewer/reader decodes (not fixed))

The audience learns that Nameless achieved his great martial arts skills after 10 years of training. Nameless allows the Qin band to be placed on his forehead to increase his chances to finally achieve his goal of killing the Qin King.

There are generalized views of film elements between opposing cultures, like the hero myth. In the typical Chinese film narrative, the hero usually dies for the cause, makes sacrifices, etc. In the typical U.S. film narrative, the hero generally never dies, seeks adventure, etc.

### 3. Myth (operating through codes and conventions can serve ideological function)

The hero conveys the meaning of dying for the cause. Once myths become naturalized as a widely distributed code, it can become common sense knowledge within a culture.

Modality, a reality status according to or claimed by a sign, text or genre, helps define how several elements create the hero myth often an invisible operation of ideological forces. High modality cues are listed here as the first in each pair (low on the right).

Modality interaction and interpretation in this visual film became very important. For example, denaturalization can make the familiar strange using modality cues. Modality cues found in *Hero* are bolded.

#### Formal

**audible**-silent

**moving**-still

**edited**-unedited

**color**-monochrome

**detailed**-abstract

**3D**-flat

#### Content

local-**distant in space**

current-**distant in time**

familiar-**unfamiliar**

plausible-**implausible**

possible-**impossible**

Notice how *Hero* has high modality in the formal category, but not in the content category, which makes the film a believable, yet fictional visual work. The infusion of the innovative within the familiar makes this film special. The meanings relayed to the

audience in the film are still convincing through the amazing visuals and unique use of color. This progressive, semiotic outline of denotation, connotation and myth helps deconstruct myth within culture. For example, the picture on the left matches the high modality in the formal cues, while the picture on the right matches the high modality in the content cues.



The close up shot on the left include the soldiers' feathers and their weapons. These elements signify the soldiers' alliance with the Qin King. Now that Nameless has been exposed as an enemy assassin in disguise, the soldiers are armed to destroy him. Also, Nameless is not looking at the soldiers which can be interpreted as the acceptance of his fate or that he is not afraid, a typical heroic trait. The red feathers also signified revolution or the impending bloodshed on Nameless but his look shows detachment from his environment. The deeper analysis goes beyond the denotative signifiers and signified into connotations, which eventually leads to the myth.

The long shot on the right uses a beautiful landscape as the background of an impossible feat occurring between two men, Nameless and Broken Sword. Not only do they defy the laws of gravity, but they are surrounded by water and are still able to maneuver during this martial arts sequence. The characters are arranged from top to bottom in their order

of significance in the story. Nameless is at the top, then Broken Sword, then the deceased Flying Snow. Broken Sword does provide Nameless with the important lesson of "All Under Heaven", but Nameless becomes the most important because his greater skills produce the one and only chance to assassinate the Qin King. The distance from the viewer also signifies how far these characters are from the audience socially. The audience could not even come close to accomplishing the feats they are viewing.

### *Hero Myth*

Nameless could be a regular human who reasons with the Qin King and/or a superior being by doing things most humans cannot do while still embodying the myth of a hero. Myth can be a repeatable character, an archetype that can be deconstructed semiotically within a culture. Cultures often communicate their fears, wants and necessities through the hero myth.

The typical martial arts film (wuxia) has grown to represent Chinese culture in a conventional way. This genre typically involves martial arts being used to kill or harm people. *Hero* breaks this convention by adding a spiritual balance to the narrative. For example, the 19 ways to write sword becomes a meaningful progression through words. First, the unity of man with sword. Second, the sword exists in man's heart and third, the absence of the sword-peace. *Hero* prompts the audience to find deeper meanings in this martial arts film compared to most other in the genre.

Nameless changes his mission while still embodying the hero myth by choosing to conquer the Qin King through meaningful words instead of the sword. Hero demonstrates his martial arts skills many times, but once Nameless become competent in Broken Sword's theme of "All Under Heaven", Nameless reaches a new level.

Before talking with Broken Sword, Nameless only seeks to assassinate the King — his mission was his only reasoning for his actions. After he listens to Broken Sword, Nameless influences the ideology of the King through the three words "All Under Heaven." Words can mean what an audience chooses them to mean, but since every culture has some version of religion involving the ideal life after death, "All Under Heaven" is a rare phrase that can transcend across cultures. "All Under Heaven" surprisingly connects with the Qin King. "My enemy is the only one who understands me," he says. The Qin King seeks to unify China through their language, etc. Nameless realizes the king's intentions could lead to the third phase of living by the sword — peace, so he chooses to plead his case to the King instead of assassinating him.

The calligraphy also breaks conventions of the traditional wuxia film. The camera rarely shows a full view of the calligraphy as the characters produce it. The audience couldn't really see what was going on. This technique makes the audience focus on the process of the calligraphy not just the finished product. The calligraphy allows Broken Sword to unlock his sword skills. Ultimately, the finished product is displayed behind the Qin King.

There are only two instances of blood in the film, which keeps the focus on the

spirituality – the plight of the characters. Actual martial arts battles are fought, but two are fought "in the mind". The visuals of the battle are shown on screen and are very believable to the audience. The characters display their martial arts skills and seem to be capable of such fighting, but seek purpose in their actions, instead of fighting for the sake of fighting.

Nameless endures many hardships and challenges to complete his mission, which could make the audience appreciate what heroes experience. Filmmakers never give Nameless a name, so he can represent the meaning of a hero interpreted by the audience. They never define the hero as a person, just by his deeds. *Hero* has become an example of Chinese national identity for the people and the film industry.

### *Heroic codes*

*Hero* never directly addresses the viewer, but draws the spectator into the film's constructed world. For example, when the candles are initially presented as a symbolic code, the signifier doesn't resemble the signified – a way for the Qin King to analyze a subject in front of him and discover his intentions. This relationship must be learned by the audience as the candles eventually become a symbolic code functioning within this film's constructed world.

One common aspect in most cultures that involves the hero myth is the idea of a savior existing in some form or being. Other savior meanings include birth and rebirth, renewal,

tragic flaw(s), perfect societies and being sent by the gods to earth to help humans run their affairs. Heroes are also communicated as people who embody admirable human traits such as truth, morality, honesty, justice and fairness.

Heroes become symbolic figures created in narratives. Certain myths die off if they don't match a culture's ideologies and desires while others endure throughout history. The hero myth becomes perpetuated when a reader finds a connection or meaning. Film can involve an audience so much that they can ignore the discourse of the film's historical references or other elements in the same way. Unless the audience is specifically thinking about this history or other elements, the film will control how the sign and signified are read by the audience. For example, Nameless' presence in Qin King's palace during a given time in history could mean the audience would accept this representation without question because they are so involved in the narrative. An audience normally would not compare actual pictures of the palace and how it compares with the film's representation as they watch in the theater, but at home, they could pause the film and research this comparison.

The audience does not see the hero, Nameless, die at the end, but instead see several arrows coming towards him. In a later scene an outline of his previous placement is surrounded by arrows, but his dead body is not seen, though the audience still can guess what happened to him — he died from the arrows. It seems the actual visual of his arrow filled body would hurt the film's meaning of the hero. Instead of concentrating on Nameless' deeds and sacrifices, the audience could find more meaning in his epic death,

especially since it is the last time Nameless is seen in the film.

### *Casting*

Another important point is the casting choice of the hero, the actual person who would embody Nameless. The 'wrong' choice or an actor not included in the characters' culture could cause audiences to respond negatively to a film (e.g. Madonna in *Evita*). Their hero means so much to their nation's identity. Jet Li was already a Chinese hero in his own right before he was cast as Nameless due to his status as a national wushu champion.

The filmmakers want to personalize the hero myth and allow the audience to displace themselves from Nameless and ask 'what would I do if I was in that position?' The audience leaves the theater with the hero's sacrifice in their minds, symbolically represented in a specific way in the film by the arrows outlining Nameless' figure.

### *Color*

*Hero* uses the colors red, green, blue, white and black to paint amazing visuals on the screen. Besides the aesthetical appeal, the colors invoke meaning to the audience.

Audiences can analyze why certain colors were chosen and other not while making comparable definitions of each color:

Blue      Red      White      Green

|           |             |            |         |        |
|-----------|-------------|------------|---------|--------|
| Subject 1 | sad         | love       | pure    | nature |
| Subject 2 | rare        | revolution | death   | peace  |
|           | celebration |            | funeral |        |

These colors can elicit various responses depending on the culture. Nameless wears black, a common color in China, when he's in the Qin King's palace, but more notably, when he fights Flying Snow. Nameless wears blue, red and white before his planned fight with her, but always wears black during the fight suggesting a bad or evil element that unfortunately must be accomplished for Nameless to succeed in his ultimate goal.

Blue and green are generally coded as cool colors that suggest tranquility, sterility and/or coldness. The use of cool colors tends to cause the image to recede in the frame. The blue sequence showing Flying Snow and Broken Sword together as lovers signifies their fading happiness, similar to the green sequence which shows happier times when they first met.

Red and yellow are generally coded as warm colors that suggest love, passion and/or stimulation. The use of the warm colors tends to cause an image to protrude in the frame. The colors red and yellow also play an important role at the mission's end. Flying Snow instructs the old man to wave a red cloth if Nameless succeeds and a yellow cloth if he fails. Yellow means royalty in China, so the failed mission would signify Flying Snow's disappointing realization that the Qin King will continue his domination in China. The audience may not know why specific colors were chosen by the director or the exact

reasoning behind the heroic portrayal of Nameless, they just interpret the signs to find various meanings.

### *Media and message*

The film's media dissemination and the consequential cultural/social differences between U.S. and Chinese audiences can also affect meanings of the film. Media is subject to familiar complications of layering and delivery. A theater experience of *Hero* would be ideal for some while an more controlled experience at home might produce a deeper experience. The capability to pause *Hero* in the DVD format allows a dialogue scene analysis which represents a notable difference between the written text (as a subtitle) and the spoken text (orally). This difference occurs when Nameless speaks to the Qin King for the last time and decides between fulfilling his assassination mission or seeking peace:

Spoken Chinese (translated) — "I have to thrust this sword to you. After I have done this, many people will die, but you will survive and the dead ask you to remember that highest ideal."

English subtitles — "Your visions have convinced me that you are committed to the highest ideal. You understand ultimate swordsmanship. I can't kill you. Remember those who gave their lives for the highest ideal — peace."

The translator provides the missing link (or links). The translation of the subtitles at this

point of the film is especially crucial because every action and element has lead up to the climax where the audience can get the most meaningful experiences of the film. The translators focus special attention only at this point and continue regular translations during the rest of the film.

### *Understanding Hero*

A film can be so involving while allowing the audience to lose themselves in entertaining escapism. When audiences experience movies, they incorporate their interior thoughts during the film, which presents a unique challenge - communicating these reactions.

Audiences eventually come to understand their personal responses to a movie. If the core meaning does not resonate with the viewer, then the film will not find a large audience. If the horror genre unsettles them, they will not watch them. Audiences also try to convince others why they like/dislike a particular film. They compare and contrast among other films as way of understanding better.

Interpretation and organization within a film become very important to the meaning, whether an individual or group. The original film creators may have specific meanings in mind, but ultimately the audience has the power to define the meaning. Chandler explains “film does not simply record an event, but is only one of an infinite number of possible representations” a reproductive fallacy presented by Andre Bazin.

The cast and crew of *Hero* do not have control over the way audiences view the film, but

*Hero* represents the values and characteristics of creators involved, especially director Zhang Yimou who portrayed the Qin King as a more human character instead of a tyrant as seen in other films like *The Emperor and the Assassin*.

The audience, or reader, must decide whether or not to accept the challenge to follow the information outlined by the film's creators. Coordination of filmmaking elements all lead towards this core meaning discovery. The audience takes a role as a reader and the filmmakers provide the map for the journey. Interests, desires and skills determine how close the audience will match the map. Filmmakers must consider what the audience knows and what the audience does not know to create a successful interaction of reader and text, or in this case, audience and visuals. For example, an audience may believe water droplets exist, but may not believe they can be whacked with swords back and forth like a tennis ball between two men flying in the air.

Audiences encounter several codes in the characters, first receiving individual characteristics and sometimes how they complement other characters. At first Nameless is full of hate and has vengeful intentions but then becomes hopeful in the Qin King's intentions. The Emperor may be a vicious ruler that makes everyone miserable, but then the audience discovers why he really wants to rule the other kingdoms, for unification, not brutal domination.

*Hero* was much less of a product (commercial film) and lead the audience through a process where they follow a specific protocol that leads or misleads them. This analysis of

*Hero* and related discourse experiences can provide invaluable knowledge about the strong core meaning of the hero myth, film, culture and ourselves.

### *References*

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