Imagery and Sound in Red Sorghum

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WHEN ZHANG YIMOU MADE HIS DIRECTORIAL DEBUT, Red Sorghum, *in 1987, he was better known as a cinematographer whose talent had been crucial to the success of critically acclaimed films like Zhang Junzhao's* One and Eight *(1984, released 1987) and Chen Kaige's* Yellow Earth *(1984). Not only did* Red Sorghum *become a seminal film of the Fifth Generation, it also won the Golden Bear at Berlin in 1988, becoming the first mainland Chinese film ever to be awarded the highest honour at a major international film competition.*

Set in the 1920s and '30s in northern China, Red Sorghum's *narrative centres on the fate of a young woman who is forced to marry a rich old leper but who eventually falls in love with a younger man. The motif of female oppression in feudal China is repeated in Zhang's next two films,* Ju Dou *(1990) and* Raise the Red Lantern *(1991). The films form a loose triptych, linked not only by similar thematic concerns but also stylistic elements. The latter include the luscious use of colour, lighting and bold composition to create the sensuous images and metaphors which have distinguished Zhang as an original auteur. Equally prominent are the silences and spare dialogue; music and sound are used with precision -- nothing extraneous is added.*

This article focuses on how visual and aural components in Red Sorghum *are employed to enhance the dramatic aspect of the narrative as well as to convey philosophical and metaphoric meaning.*

RED SORGHUM is narrated as much through its storyline as by its splendid images and aural qualities. The film is photographed by Gu Changwei (who also shot Chen Kaige's (*Farewell, My Concubine*) in Cinemascope; the music is composed by Zhao Jiping, who has since composed the rest of the music scores for Zhang's films. The opening sequence establishes the vibrant mood and mythical atmosphere of the film and introduces the themes of passion and freedom through powerful imagery and music. It also establishes Zhang Yimou as a visual sensualist.

In a deserted setting comprising mainly sand and stone, a strain of wedding music grows progressively louder. A traditional red sedan chair carried by a group of shirtless men, followed closely by a retinue of trumpeters and drummers, enliven the harsh landscape. Inside the covered sedan chair, the pretty face of a young bride is cast in crimson shadow. The twenty-two year-old Gong Li projects a charismatic blend of sensuality and rebellion in her acting debut as Nine (Jiu), qualities that will characterize her imminent roles in Zhang's next two films.

Gong Li, who has since become China's most well-known female star, confesses that she can easily identify with the headstrong Nine: "Jiu dares to act and take responsibility for her actions; she dares to love and hate. She is fearless. I think our temperaments are similar. I was interested in the role and was confident I could play it well."[(1)] In this scene, Nine's impassive features reveal a hint of defiance and a touch of boredom as she sits in brooding silence. Parting the red curtain before her ever so slightly, she seems to be mesmerised by the sight of the bare, muscular back belonging to one of the sedan carriers whom we later know as Yu, the narrator's grandfather (played with finesse by Jiang Wen).

The seemingly innocuous image of sexual curiosity provides the first suggestion of Nine's eroticism. The sedan chair carriers, all earthy and muscular peasants, tease Nine about her impending fate as the wife of Big Head Li, their leprous boss. Nine, too proud to reply to their jibing, obstinately remains silent. Wishing to break down her reserve and at the same time acting in accordance with the local custom, the men jolt the wedding sedan chair and make fun of the bride in a raucous song. As they sing and dance in synchronized steps with clouds of sand and dust flying around them, the revellers create a mythical image of solidarity, freedom and vitality. However, in ironical contrast to the genteel convention of beautiful women being serenaded by handsome admirers, the lyrics sung by the peasant sedan chair carriers are rudely humorous:

Look closely -- pitted pockmarks
A squashed nose and piggy, piggy eyes
A chicken neck, an ugly face
A head crawling with lots and lots of lice...[2]

The lively, noisy scene carries implicit eroticism, suggested by the naked torsos of the men, the curiosity of a virginal bride, and the rhythmic movements caused by the jolting of the sedan chair. The tossing action effectively evokes the men's projection of their subconscious desire for the bride.[3]

The scene is also a superb example of how tension is created through contrast. As the men sing their boisterous eulogy with gusto, Nine struggles to control her sobs and retching. The bright daylight in which the sedan carriers careen is interpolated with the dark interior of the wedding sedan chair which serves as the prison bearing Nine to her unfortunate fate. Crying and trying to steady herself in the sedan, Nine picks up a pair of wire scissors from the floor taken from her father's home and hides it inside her wedding outfit. The close-up of Nine's embroidered red shoe stepping on the pair of black scissors and her trembling hand reaching down for it is an eloquent image of her character which is capable of intense passion and hatred.

Finally, her sobbing is noticed by one of the men and the jolting and singing cease. By this time, the procession, which was so jolly a few moments ago, now move silently through the dreaded fields of tall wild sorghum known as Qingsha Kou (Murderer's Gulch), warily eyeing the thick wild plants which are rumoured to be inhabited by ghosts. At this point, the background score plays the eerie sounds which every viewer of Chinese haunted movies recognises -- the mournful reverberation of Chinese gongs amidst the chirping of crickets that precedes the appearance of the ghost.

However, even more vicious than ghosts is a masked bandit who suddenly holds up the procession and strips the men off their money on the pretext that he is the infamous local gangster, Sanpao. As expected, the bandit moves curiously towards the sedan chair to see the hidden bride. Upon pulling off her red bridal veil, he sees Nine observing him calmly. Entranced by her beauty, he reaches down to hold her foot encased in a red embroidered shoe. Looking at the masked bandit, Nine's face registers understanding of her power over him; at this moment, he is the conquered and she the conqueror. As if amused by the thought, Nine breaks into a sudden smile, revealing a flash of white teeth. Taken aback by the bride's unexpected boldness, the bandit orders her out of the sedan and into the thick sorghum plantation where his intention is obvious.

The cool compliance of Nine reveals her dauntless confidence. As she walks leisurely into the sorghum, she turns towards Yu who is forced to crouch beside the sedan chair with the other men, and looks challengingly at him to rescue her. Making her way slowly into the tall sorghum, she pauses and looks at Yu again. Heeding Nine's plea, Yu lunges at the bandit, and the other sedan chair carriers follow suit. The bandit is beaten to death and the men discover that he is only an imposter of Sanpao. All this while, not a word has been exchanged between Nine and Yu, but their mutual attraction, conveyed by the exchange of desiring glances, is unmistakable. Seated calmly again in the bridal sedan, Nine gazes at the enraptured Yu before she abruptly lets the sedan's red curtain fall before her. Throughout this sequence red is given prominence as a symbol of passion and sexual desire.

In one of Zhang's first utilisation of repetition, Yu, like the murdered bandit, moves towards the sedan chair and grabs hold of Nine's foot protruding slightly under the curtain. In a reversal of roles, Nine is now the one who is startled by this bold gesture of desire as she withdraws her foot into the sedan, her own feelings aroused.

On Nine's nuptial night, she presumably protects herself from Big Head Li's advances with her scissors. The assumption is implied rather than stated through a series of evocative images. The scene begins with the image of a terrified Nine in her red wedding dress, crouched in a corner of the room clutching the pair of black scissors to her chest. Beside her is a pile of red wedding quilts lit by the glow of two oil lamps. The rustling of bedsheets in another corner of the room indicates the presence of her husband, whom the audience never sees.

This is followed by a serene image of the moon shining above the distillery's distinctive landscape -- a rock formation in the shape of an arch perched high on the dusty hill which marks the entrance to the premises of the distillery. For the night scenes which are shot outdoors, Zhang uses blue filters to evoke a fairytale

landscape. In this image, the blue filter is in sharp contrast to the red imagery of the previous shot, endowing the landscape with a mythical quality and an atmosphere of quiet and lyrical melancholy.

The next image shifts to the dark interior of the distillery workers' room. The men are asleep except for Luohan who is still awake and smoking a water pipe. The gurgling of the water in the pipe is the only sound that can be heard in the house. Suddenly, from another room, a woman's scream pierces the quiet night, startling the men from their sleep. It takes only a moment for them to identify the cause of the scream; unable to do anything to protect Nine from the leper's conjugal right, the men return to slumber. Sitting at a table, Luohan reflects in silence before extinguishing the night lamp. In this short scene, nothing appears to have happened, yet the atmosphere is heavy with unspoken tragedy and resignation.

Zhang's use of sunlight in the film is also significant. For example, as Nine defiantly prods the mule into a canter in order to escape her father's censuring, the camera captures her literally riding into the brilliant orb on the horizon. Not only does the image capture Nine's strength of character, it also enhances the mythical nature of both the narrative and Nine's character. Indeed, the main characters are often shot against the sun, the blinding light bestowing upon them an aura of vibrancy.

One of the most memorable scenes in the film occurs during Nine's journey to visit her father's house three days after her wedding. Passing through Qingsha Kou, Nine seems to hear strange movements amidst the rustling of the sorghum leaves in the strong breeze. Suddenly, from among the sorghum, a masked man appears and abducts her into the plantation. Here begins the breathtaking use of the camera to create suspense, excitement and urgency. As the masked stranger snatches Nine from the mule, he carries her in an unexpectedly primitive manner -- horizontally under his arm -- as if she were no more than a writhing bundle of fabric. The camera pursues the two, only to be met with thick sorghum plants closing behind them like verdant curtains. Their movement amidst the greenery is revealed by a high angled shot showing flashes of red belonging to Nine's outfit.

The audience is made to identify with Nine's perspective through a subjective shot as a hand-held camera shows sorghum plants being hastily parted. The camera then tracks parallel to the action, capturing a flurry of movement and blurred faces. It then follows behind the couple as they fall to the ground. In desperation, Nine tries to run away, pushing the sorghum aside as the abductor chases after her. Pausing for a moment's respite after bolting around in confusion, Nine is suddenly confronted by the masked man whom the viewer now strongly suspects to be Yu.

Gazing at Nine, the man pulls off his mask, confirming our suspicion. Nine looks dazedly at Yu as she recovers from her surprise. In a wordless exchange of glances, she communicates her sexual desire for him. The latter begins to trample upon the six-foot-high sorghum which Yu flattens into a circular bed. Having accomplished this, Yu once again takes Nine under his arm and effortlessly carries her into the clearing. His manner of courtship, brusque and unpretentious, emphasises male power, strength and virility.[(4)] In contrast to the image of the civilized gentleman, Yu exudes a raw and vital energy which makes him a compatible match for the bold-spirited Nine.

At this point, the shrill background music of the traditional *suona* horn is announced, "echoing the sounds of an old man shouting in the fields" while drums "like the beating of a human heart"[(5)] herald their ardour and liberation. The camera moves to show a close-up of Nine's face, eyes closed in rapture with the sun like a halo around her as she softly falls backward onto her true nuptial bed of red sorghum.

Another high-angled shot reveals in panoramic beauty Nine outstretched on the ground with Yu standing over her, while all around them, the red sorghum plants wave and rustle in the wind. The next image gives the film its title: a close-up of the rhythmic undulation of the red sorghum leaves in the wind -- a powerful metaphor for the sexual act and a symbol of the film's central themes of passion and freedom. Later in the film, the trampling of the sorghum field changes into a symbol of oppression as the members of the community, young and old, are forced by Japanese soldiers to flatten the wild sorghum to make space for a new highway.

In *Red Sorghum*, Zhang uses the interaction between nature and human beings to produce images filled with vitality. Yu and Nine consummate their love not in the darkness of a room but under a blazing sun in the sorghum field. Their ardent encounter results in the birth of their son Douguan (Liu Ji), underscoring the

fact that passion is the source of life, both literally and figuratively. The film goes beyond using sexuality to express human passion; it also makes the point that passion is something good and desirable, even essential. The essence of living with a measure of intensity is that it encourages action, paving the way for independence and freedom. To have the will and courage to act according to one's conscience is to possess passion, without which it becomes impossible to transcend the safety trap of mediocrity, conventionality and oppressive traditions.

The use of nature is also featured in the wine-making process which transforms the sorghum plant, with the addition of water and the application of heat to become red sorghum wine. An unorthodox natural ingredient, urine, which Yu bestows in a spirit of defiance, surprisingly improves the flavour and causes the wine to become famous. Later the act is repeated in the film when Yu commands his son, Douguan, to urinate into a vat of sorghum wine. This time, the purpose is to fortify the wine as a weapon against the Japanese enemies.

The wine-making sequence also contains an extraordinarily earthy scene; Yu saunters into the wine-press, interrupting the amiable conversation of the workers with mocking words, his voice unusually deep, betraying his pent-up tension from the recent confrontation with the notorious bandit, Sanpao (Ji Cunhua), an encounter from which he has miraculously emerged alive. The heated atmosphere with the entrance of Yu is made palpable through the smoke of the fires and the perspiration of workers. Yu proceeds to soothe his raw nerves by urinating into several vats of newly consecrated wine. He then offers to empty the huge pot of ash produced by the wine-making process. As Yu shovels out the pot, the director films him from a low angle, emphasizing his strength and virility. The ash falls in showers around the radiant Nine who stands rooted to the ground as if transfigured by the falling ash. Seeing her thus impassioned, Yu carries her in his customary fashion and takes her to bed, marking their new beginning as husband and wife. The scene is remarkable for its tangible sense of tension and passion accomplished almost purely through imagery.

While the use of natural elements heightens the emotion of passion, the songs in *Red Sorghum* seem to celebrate the right to individual expression and freedom from oppression. They also reinforce the mythical content of the film; the songs are close in sound and form to traditional Shandong opera, and two of them -- the sedan carriers' song and the song to the god of wine -- have lyrics by Zhang himself.(6) In the scene after Yu and Nine have made love in the sorghum, Nine continues her journey on muleback to her father's house with Yu travelling parallel to her, completely hidden in the tall sorghum. As they journey along, Yu serenades with gusto to Nine. His song aggravates and perplexes Nine's father who is unable to see the hidden singer.

> *Press on, bravely, sweetheart, press on, don't turn back.*
> *There are 9990 roads, 9990 roads to heaven... Press on, bravely, sweetheart, press on, don't turn back.*
> *You'll have a red betrothal stall,*
> *To choose a man you'll throw a ball*
> *And on my head it'll fall.*
> *I'll drink with you,*
> *We'll drink red, red sorghum wine.*(7)

Since the cheeky ballad is sung with clear disregard of Nine's marital status in the presence of her father, the song is not only Yu's token of love to her but it is also a statement of rebellion against tradition and authority.

Another remarkable song in the film is sung by the distillery workers to consecrate the new red sorghum wine. Besides being good humoured and down-to-earth, the lyrics invoke good health and courage and a hint of rebellion:

> *New wine on the ninth of ninth*
> *Good wine from our labour, good wine!*
> *If you drink our wine,*
> *You'll breathe well, you won't cough.*
> *If you drink our wine,*

You'll be well, your breath won't smell.
If you drink our wine,
You'll dare go through Qingsha Kou *alone.*
If you drink our wine,
You won't kowtow to the emperor
On the ninth of ninth you'll go with me
Good wine, good wine, good wine![8]

The anti-authoritarian implication is not only found in the song's lyrics, it is suggested by the very act of wine-drinking. In the Chinese historical memory, heavy drinking can be a transgression of decorum, an act of defying convention, a route to visionary intensity or a way of achieving autonomy. It also bears the burden of moral condemnation for spiritual degradation, over-indulgence and social irresponsibility.[9]

The popularity of the film in China when it was screened in the mid-1980s reflects not only a more tolerant political climate but also the rediscovery of pleasure-giving elements such as sex, wine and earthy songs and the tenuous rejection of Communist puritanism together with many other tenets of the Chinese Communist dogma.

In *Red Sorghum*, Zhang presents images and sounds of pleasure as a means to augment the desire and courage to do what is right. Towards the end of the film, the distillery workers make a vow to avenge Luohan's death by chanting the song to the God of Wine. By drinking the wine in Luohan's memory, they invoke the valour of heroes to carry out justice, even at the expense of sacrificing their lives.

The final scene compresses with mythical power the themes of the film. The red colour of the landscape, introduced through the unforgettable image of a solar eclipse, is a searing reflection of the violence and bloodshed in the struggle against the Japanese. However, it is also a reminder of the characters' love of life, passion and spiritual freedom. By chanting a children's rhyme to send off his mother's soul into her next life, Douguan reminds the audience that true heroes never really die; they are immortalized in legends to have their lives of passion, boldness, and freedom recounted and emulated.

Notes

1. Chen Fumin, "Gong Li-China's Newest Star" in *Current Chinese Cinema: What's New in China 36*, ed. Bao Wenqing (Beijing: China Reconstructs Press, 1989), pp. 48-49.

2. Zhang Yimou, *Red Sorghum*, China 1987 (transcribed from the film).

3. This point has also been noted in Wang Yuejin's "Red Sorghum: Mixing Memory and Desire," *Perspectives in Chinese Cinema*, ed. Chris Berry (London, British Film Institute, 1991), p. 95.

4. For a fuller discussion of masculinity in *Red Sorghum*, see Wang, pp. 85-90.

5. Zhang Yimou, "Red Sorghum," interview with Bao Wenqing, in *Current Chinese Cinema (36)* (Beijing: China Reconstructs Press, 1989), p. 29.

6. Tony Rayns, "Chinese Vocabulary: an Introduction to *King of the Children* and The New Chinese Cinema (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. 49.

7. Zhang Yimou, *Red Sorghum*, China 1987 (transcribed from the film).

8. Ibid.

9. Wang, pp. 86-87.

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Red Sorghum (1987). Awards: Golden Bear, Berlin Film Festival, 1988; Closing Night film, New York Film Festival, 1988; Official Chinese selection for Academy Award consideration, 1988; Merit Script Award, China's Broadcast, Film and TV Merit Award Presentation, 1988; Golden Rooster Awards (professional awards granted by the China Film Association) for Best Story, Best Cinematography, Best Sound Recording and Best Musical Score, 1988; Hundred Flowers Award for Best Story, sponsored by *Popular Cinema* (China's most widely-read film magazine), 1988.

Operation Cougar (a.k.a. *Codename Cougar*, 1989)
Ju Dou (1990). Awards: Luis Buñuel Award at Cannes; Golden Hugo for Best Film at Chicago; Academy Nomination for Best Foreign Language Film Award.

Raise the Red Lantern (1991). Awards: Five Prizes at the Venice Film Festival including the Silver Lion; American Academy Nomination for Best Foreign Language Film Award.

The Story of Qiu Ju (1992). Awards: Golden Lion and Best Actress Award at the Venice Film Festival.

To Live (1993). Awards: Grand Jury Prize (ex aequo), Best Actor, Ecumenical Prize, Cannes Film Festival, 1994.
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Yellow Earth, dir. Chen Kaige (1984). Award: Best Photography, Nantes

The Big Parade, dir. Chen Kaige (1985)

Old Well, dir. Wu Tianming (1987)

As Actor:
Old Well, dir. Wu Tianming (1987). Award: Best Actor Award at the Tokyo International Film Festival.

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