Analytical Paper

The analytical paper is five to six pages long and differs from the film review, in that it is not primarily evaluative. This paper allows students to analyze a film, in terms of its social, political, and ideological contexts, by focusing on a close reading of the film text. Students apply the methodology of the screening report, but with a larger focus on understanding the filmic logic of a particular movie. I encourage them to work with the various theoretical positions we’ve discussed in class and to choose an approach that lends itself to the film. They must also provide a detailed analysis of film technique in two or three scenes. Using film theory allows the students to situate their study of film in cultural and discursive contexts; requiring them to use technical analysis reminds them that film involves specific inscription processes, which differ significantly from other forms of print and non-print media.

Sample Student Analytical Paper

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, by Maria Williams

Hong Kong cinema has unquestionably founded their filmic reputation out of the 1950’s martial-arts action films produced by the Shaw Brothers. This can be reaffirmed through the statement in Film Art that, "Shaws made films in many genres, but among its biggest successes were dynamic, gory sword fighting films (wuxia pian, or ‘tales of martial chivalry’)" (493). Such films eventually lead to the endorsement of classic martial artists from Bruce Lee to Jackie Chan, ultimately establishing a sort of genre built around "meticulously choreographed action sequences," ideally performed by a charismatic actor (494). However, as demand increased, so did production, which prompted many filmmakers to put a great deal of effort into the action-packed sequences, as things such as narrative and characterization became subordinated.

Perhaps, the knowledge that even the greatest cinematic martial arts sequences are only heightened by a powerful narrative, spurred Ang Lee to make a film out of the Chinese novel Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon. In this film, the narrative's primary function is not only to frontline the brilliantly choreographed fighting scenes, but also to adjoin such sequences with a powerful narrative that touches upon the emotional vulnerability associated with the human condition. Ultimately, Lee’s final product seems to be breaking free from the conventions of the clichéd martial art films of his past, by submitting a product that has a multi-layered narrative which is only enhanced by cinematographic effects and editing.

One of the first things to notice about Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, is the quality of the narrative which according to Cinema Studies, "Refers to the strategies, codes and conventions (including mise-en-scene and lighting) employed to organize a story" (257). In light of this, if you look at the basic character motivations in this story it becomes clear that the characters within are functioning for a variety of complex reasons, most of which are clearly related to the wuxia pian genre. Li Mu Bai (Chow Yun-Fat), a celebrated Wudan warrior wants to retire his sword, referred to as "The Green Destiny," which is a symbol of his feats in battle, to make it possible to declare his love for the previously engaged Yu Shu Lien (Michelle Yeoh). However, trouble ensues when the sword, after being presented to a friend of Li Mui Bai's, was stolen. On the road to getting the sword back, the culprit turned out to be an unlikely suspect, who is also an extremely gifted sword fighter.

This thief is otherwise known as Jen Yu (Ziyi Zhang) and perhaps her source of motivation is one of the key places that Ang Lee is breaking free from the conventions of wuxia pian. For example, in this first scene that we encounter Jen Yu, she is attired in what is assumed to be the traditional clothing for a governor’s daughter. The apparatus makes clear note of the restrictions associated with her role in society by juxtaposing her costume at a medium long shot with that of Yu Shu Lien. This eventually leads to alternating point-of-view shots among the two women, but the spectator comes to see Jen Yu as the subject of the film, due to her lack of freedom in comparison with Yu Shu Lien. This creates a complex relationship between the spectator and Jen Yu because essentially her motivations appear natural and harmless, yet once she becomes identified as the one who stole the "Green Destiny," the other characters become essentially under her control. However, as the film progresses and her actions cause pain and suffering to the only two people who had been patient with her, Li Mui Bai and Yu Shu Lien, her arrogance and naïveté began to reveal her as a confused youth who ultimately ruins any chance at happiness for herself and others. Thus again Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon is challenging the genre because kung-fu films are notorious for having a male protagonist, but in this film, we see a female character causing the narrative to occur and establishing a complex relationship with the spectator.
The mise-en-scene also plays a key role in the execution of the narrative, particularly in the various battle scenes within. An example of a fight scene where we see precision applied to all of the elements of mise-en-scene, is the fight scene directly after Jen Yu has accused Yu Shu Lien of plotting against her. The setting is ideal for a fight because of the centered brick floor and the high ceilings, not to mention the vast array of weaponry dispersed on the walls which become showcased throughout the duel. The women are both wearing a traditional attire of a warrior which compared to the aforementioned scene, sets them as equals. Also, the seamless lighting, traditionally found in Hollywood cinema, serves to enhance both the setting and the individuals by not requiring much attention on the behalf of the spectator (Cinema Studies 211). However, one thing that does draw attention to itself in this film is the sound. In this scene, the diegetic sound consisting of the swords hitting and the noises made by the women is combined with a non-diegetic drum beat which is always present whenever the two women are in combat. Combining all of these elements, the apparatus again plays an important role by framing the fight. There are a vast array of different shots used which range from overhead shots that accentuate the physical effort, to close-ups of the individuals that reveal emotional reactions.

Of course, despite all the non-diegetic effort placed on the aesthetic principles, the flawless choreography of each battle that has a great affect on the spectator. According to the DVD-Special Features, Ang Lee chose avoid digital rendering by equipping each of the actors with a set of cables to allow them to defy gravity and thus make available a variety of previously unexplored settings. An example of this can be found with the penultimate encounter between Jen Yu and Li Mu Bai where they fighting atop the bamboo trees, a non-traditional setting for a duel. As each individual character dances with the bamboo in the hope of achieving victory over the other, time and space become arbitrary and inconsistent. This happens in a variety of ways, such as the way that time slows down as Jen Yu is falling through the forest as though it is the bamboo that controls her physical being. As Jen Yu and Li Mu Bai find themselves on a long branch facing each other, again time slows down to reiterate the internal strength and peace inside of Li Mu Bai which is juxtaposed to the blatant uncertainty of Jen Yu. It is this combination of a duel exposing the psychological intricacies of the characters that makes each battle so dissimilar to any Jackie Chan movie. After all, in a traditional kung-fu film time, space, and character are normalized to make the martial artistry appear more realistic, making it absolutely central to the narrative.

Just because this film breaks some of the codes and conventions associated with the wuxia pian genre, does not mean that Ang Lee is unaware of the entertainment value associated with a comedic kung-fu film. One of the scenes where he seems to lampoon such a style is in the scene where Jen Yu, off to seek adventures, becomes the target of a drunken bar crowd who would like to prove themselves worthy of dueling the one holding the Green Destiny. One of the first ways that this scene becomes laughable is through the situational irony that is created, a typical feature of a wuxia pian film. Here Jen Yu, who seeks an adventurous life, yet still expects to live luxuriously, is encountered by a rambling group of stereotyped enemies whose names range from "Flying Saber" to "Shining Phoenix Mountain Gou" all of whom are carrying an array of elaborate weapons such as steel fans, and leather clubs. Of course, despite their strength in numbers, she effortlessly decimates the gathered fighters. As the apparatus zooms out to reveal the result of Jen Yu's warfare, the scene comes to represent the idea that kung-fu heroes are often viewed as indestructible. While Lee makes Jen Yu appear in such a way for this scene, it seems to be a clear meta-filmic gesture to what this movie could be like, if its characters lacked the ability to suffer.

By not allowing action to be the sole guiding force of the narrative of Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, Ang Lee has indeed made some adaptations to wuxia pian genre. The characters within are not simply physical beings designed to carry out the action, but instead they are developed and complicated, making it difficult to categorize them as the stereotyped hero or villain found in many kung-fu films. After all, even Jade Fox, who plays a villain for the majority of the film, inspires sympathy at her death when she admits that Jen's ability to understand the Wudan manual made her painfully realize her own fallibilities as a warrior. Therefore, Ang Lee not only creates multi-dimensional characters, but he also displays an acute understanding of what codes and conventions of the wuxia pian genre must be changed in order to develop a compelling narrative. As a result, his final product is a movie that is entertaining without sacrificing its narrative form, thus shedding a new light on the psychological capabilities of a martial arts film.