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Phenomenological Analysis the Architectur of Image in Zhang Yimou's Cinema: A Case Study of the Film Hero (2002) with Reference to Juhani Pallasmaa's Approach

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Abstract

This research examines the role of architectural imagery in Zhang Yimou's cinema, with a focus on the film Hero (2002). Employing a descriptive-analytical methodology and drawing on Juhani Pallasmaa's perspectives on architectural phenomenology, the study demonstrates how Zhang Yimou utilizes colors and set design as symbolic tools to narrate the epics and history of China. Concepts of Taoism and phenomenology are reflected in Yimou's architectural imagery in a way that creates a profound, multisensory experience for the audience. The significance of this research lies in providing a theoretical framework for the phenomenological analysis of imagery in Zhang Yimou's cinema, which can contribute to a deeper understanding of the relation between image architectural and the sensory experience of the audience in film. The findings reveal a meaningful connection between image architectural and architectural phenomenology, leading to the development of a theoretical framework for analyzing the phenomenology of imagery in Zhang Yimou's cinema.

Keywords: Tao, Zhang Yimou, Architectural imagery, Film phenomenology, Juhani Pallasmaa.

1 | Introduction

Cinema, as a multifaceted art form, creates a unique image architectural through a phenomenological perspective on the surrounding world, reflecting the culture and philosophy of the filmmaker. Each filmmaker, shaped by their cultural background, develops a distinct worldview, which is manifested in the image architectural of their works. Zhang Yimou, one of the most prominent filmmakers in world cinema, has crafted his own cinematic universes through the use of visual elements and set design. His films not only

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mirror the cultural characteristics of his era but also depict the dimensions and essence of existential space. The fusion of cinema and architecture offers a fresh perspective on life, where cinema and architecture together form the "house of being". As an auteur, the filmmaker reveals the cultural and philosophical traits of their time through image architectural. This study focuses on analyzing the structure of Zhang Yimou's martial arts cinema, which provides audiences with a multisensory experience of image architectural. Central to this investigation is the perception and experience of image architectural in cinema, analyzed through the phenomenological approach of Juhani Pallasmaa.

The interaction between cinema and architecture—architecture embedded in cinematic expression and the cinematic nature of architectural perception—is similarly multifaceted [1]. The architectural imagery in Zhang Yimou's cinema is deeply influenced by Taoism. Taoism, one of the great philosophical traditions originating from China, emerged around the 4th to 5th centuries BCE. The word "Tao" in Chinese means "the way," understood as "the way of nature" [2]. The primary focus of this research is to explore the commonalities between Juhani Pallasmaa's views on architectural phenomenology and the architectural imagery in Zhang Yimou's cinema. The aim of this study is to identify the elements influencing the image architectural in Zhang's films based on the key concepts of Pallasmaa's theories and to analyze their relation with haptic and embodied perceptions.

2 | Research Methodology

This study examines the architectural imagery of space, light, material, and sound in Zhang Yimou's film *Hero* (2002). The research focuses on the methods through which these visual and auditory elements create specific emotions, characteristics, and meanings. The study adopts a qualitative approach, relying on library resources (including books, articles, and news reports) and online information. Data were collected through descriptive-analytical methods, primarily by observing the case study film. Subsequently, the identified variables and their relation with the theoretical foundations of the research were analyzed and interpreted.

For the analysis of architectural imagery, the research plan was designed in the form of sketches, focusing on understanding the relation between architecture and tactile perception. The stages of the research are illustrated in *Fig. 1*. This methodological approach allows for a comprehensive exploration of how Zhang Yimou's cinematic techniques align with phenomenological principles, offering new insights into the interplay between visual, spatial, and sensory elements in his work.

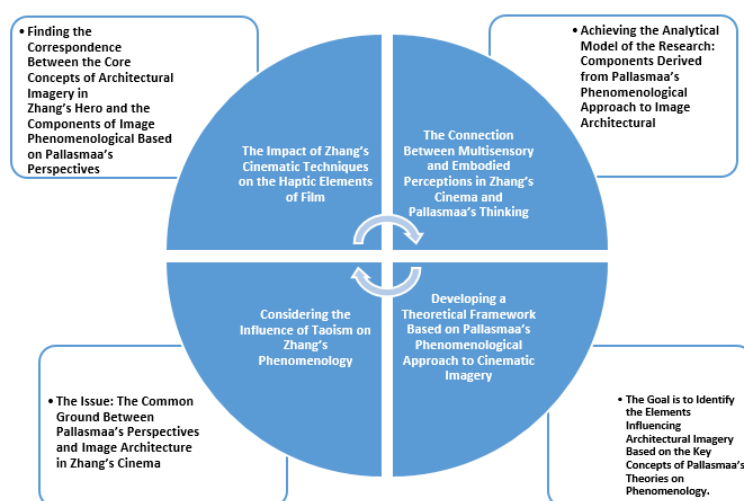


Fig. 1. Conceptual model of the research.

3 | Literature Review

Juhani Pallasmaa [2] is a Finnish architect, phenomenologist, and former dean of the Helsinki University of Architecture. His ideas have gained global recognition in recent years. While no study directly addresses the current research topic, several works explore sensory and embodied perceptions in architecture and Zhang Yimou's cinema, which are closely related to this study. Key titles of Pallasmaa's works relevant to cinema are summarized in *Table 1*.

For instance, Sharifian [3], in an article titled "a comparative study of architectural phenomenology in the theories of Juhani Pallasmaa and Steven Holl," examines architectural phenomenology and multisensory perceptions, analyzing the similarities and differences between the theories of these two philosophers. Similarly, Maryam Amanpour [4], in her article "architectural phenomenology: multisensory perceptions in the Thought of Juhani Pallasmaa," explores the role of the human body in perceiving constructed spaces from Pallasmaa's perspective. She argues that the presence and mobility of the body within built spaces, as well as the influence of filled and empty spaces on the audience's bodily dimensions, are fundamental characteristics of architecture [5].

Furthermore, Margaret Kendrick, in her article "what do we see in architecture and film design?" investigates the architecture in Zhang Yimou's films. From her perspective, Zhang's films exhibit a form of "architecture of violence" as well as "social architecture." Kendrick connects the class-related themes in Zhang's cinema to social architecture, linking it to Chinese culture [6]. Although these studies focus on architectural phenomenology, none specifically analyze the architecture of imagery in cinema. Therefore, the present research is considered innovative and original due to its phenomenological approach to the architecture of imagery in Zhang Yimou's cinema, viewed through the lens of Juhani Pallasmaa's theories.

Table 1. The most important theoretical works of juhani pallasmaa and their key concepts.

Book / Article Titles
The geometry of feeling: a view on the phenomenology of architecture (1985)
The thinking hand: existential and embodied wisdom in architecture (1996)
The architecture of image: existential space in cinema (2001)
The eyes of the skin: architecture and the senses (2005)
Questions of perception: phenomenology of architecture (2015)
Embodied imagination: imagination and fantasy in architecture (2016)
Embodied imagination: imagination and fantasy in architecture (2016)

4 | Fundamentals and Theoretical Framework

4.1 | Taoism

Researchers believe that the foundational philosophy of Taoism emerged as a school of thought around the 6th century BCE. However, the roots of Taoist thinking are far older, and it can be argued that these ideas have a history as ancient as the myths and beliefs of the Chinese people. For many Taoists, the origin of Taoist teachings is traced back to Huang Di, the legendary ruler and great sage of china, known as the Yellow Emperor [2]. The Tao is an indescribable and formless path, considered the source of the universal creative force. One of the most fundamental concepts in Taoism is the energy of "Qi." Taoists believe that the world is created from Qi. This energy flows through all plants, animals, and humans, giving them life. Qi is divided into "Heavenly Qi" and "Earthly Qi," with the sun being the origin of all. In Zhang Yimou's cinema, this concept is clearly observable. When Zhang places the subject at the center of the frame, he effectively highlights the center of Qi, drawing the viewer's maximum attention to the subject. This approach not only reflects the philosophy of Taoism but also, as part of Zhang's visual architecture, creates a multisensory and embodied experience for the audience.

4.2 | Phenomenology

Phenomenology, as a philosophical approach, traces its roots back to Descartes but was more distinctly established as an independent movement by Edmund Husserl, the German philosopher. Husserl referred to phenomenology as "egology" or the study of the self. The central issue in phenomenology is tracing the origin of the formation of consciousness in epistemology. We must suspend all judgments related to natural reality, placing them in brackets—a process Husserl termed epoché [7]. Consequently, phenomenology is a regressive method and process, meaning that to understand any phenomenon, we must return to its origin and the moment of its formation in consciousness [7].

When Husserl introduced the slogan "back to the things themselves," he was referring to returning to the moment and mode of the formation of the exemplary consciousness of that object or phenomenon. Thus, it is essential to emphasize that phenomenology adopts a subjective perspective. The foundation of this subjectivity is the "transcendental ego," which shapes the exemplary aspect of objects. One of the most significant concepts in Husserlian phenomenology is intentionality. Intentionality refers to the cognitive structure of the transcendental ego, which is always directed outward. Husserl employs the concepts of noesis and noema to explain this phenomenon. In other words, for Husserl, the transcendental has only one formal or structural characteristic: intentionality. The zero point of cognition is, in fact, this formal and empty structure of the mind, which is filled with cognitive content during moments of understanding.

4.3 | Phenomenology of Film

The phenomenology of images in general, and the phenomenology of cinematic images in particular, can be better understood through these concepts. From this perspective, cinema is a cognitive domain that simultaneously fulfills multiple roles. It functions as a determining subjective mind, a determined objectivity, and a language that connects this mind and objectivity. These three phenomenological dimensions of film position it as a self-sufficient and self-reflective "transcendental ego," whose object is itself, and the language and tools through which it manifests phenomenologically are also itself.

Phenomenology of cinema focuses on the principle that film, as an inherently distinct phenomenon and a visual art, must first and foremost be examined as a sensory experience. Its visual and auditory elements play a crucial role in creating meaning and evoking emotions in the audience. In other words, the theory of film phenomenology emphasizes the process of meaning formation and the experiential engagement of the viewer's mind [8].

4.4 | Key Concepts of Juhani Pallasmaa's Theories

Although Juhani Pallasmaa's primary focus is on architecture, his theories on sensory perception and spatial experience can be extended to other fields, including cinema. In his renowned work, *The Eyes of the Skin*, Pallasmaa [9] emphasizes the importance of non-visual senses—touch, smell, and hearing—in the experience of architecture and sensory perception. He argues that architecture and space are not perceived solely through vision; rather, all senses play a role in this process. This idea can also be applied to cinema, where the experience of a film is not limited to visual imagery but is enriched by sound, music, and even the atmosphere of the cinema itself, creating a multisensory experience [9]. From Pallasmaa's perspective, space and time are inseparable, and the experience of space always unfolds within the context of time. This concept is particularly relevant in cinema, where time and space are in constant interaction, shaping the viewer's experience. Cinema creates spaces through images and sounds that can influence our perception of architecture, and vice versa. Sensory experiences are integrated through the body—or more precisely, through the structure of the body and the way humans exist in the world. Psychoanalytic theory introduces the concept of the "body image" or "body schema" as the center of integration. Our bodies and movements are in constant interaction with the environment; the world and the self continuously inform and redefine each other. The perception of the body and the image of the world merge into a unified, continuous existential experience. No body exists apart from its dwelling in space, and no space exists without being related to the unconscious image of the perceiver [9].

Pallasmaa's perspective is particularly evident in the films of Zhang Yimou, where the architecture of the image and the sensory experience of the audience are intricately intertwined. Zhang's films create a multisensory and embodied experience for the viewer, not only through visual imagery but also through sound, music, and cinematic space. By engaging multiple senses, Zhang's work exemplifies how cinema can transcend mere visual storytelling to evoke a deeper, more immersive connection with the audience.

5 | Research Findings

5.1 | Architectural Symbolism and Taoism

Zhang Yimou's *Hero* uses architectural elements like symmetry, color, and natural landscapes to reflect Taoist principles such as harmony, balance, and Wu Wei (effortless action). These visuals deepen the film's cultural and philosophical themes.

5.2 | Multi-Sensory Experience

Inspired by Juhani Pallasmaa's theories, the film engages multiple senses (sight, sound, touch) through its architectural spaces. This creates an immersive experience, making the audience feel emotionally connected to the cinematic world.

5.3 | Cultural and Emotional Depth

The film's architecture reflects Chinese history and culture, using traditional elements like calligraphy and martial arts. The interplay of light, color, and space evokes strong emotions, enhancing the film's atmosphere and storytelling.

5.4 | Critique of Modern Aesthetics

Hero challenges modern architecture's focus on visual appeal by prioritizing multi-sensory engagement. This approach aligns with Pallasmaa's call for architecture that emphasizes human experience over mere aesthetics.

6 | Discussion

6.1 | Analysis of the Visual Architecture in the Film *Hero* (2002)

In the realm of the Qin Kingdom, approximately 2,200 years ago, a ruthless ruler governed what is now modern-day China. At that time, China was divided into seven warring states. This ruler aspired to unify the country, but the six other kingdoms regarded him as their common enemy. Amidst this turmoil, three warriors—Flying Snow (played by Maggie Cheung), Sky (played by Donnie Yen), and Broken Sword (played by Tony Leung)—spent ten years attempting to assassinate King Qin.

Nameless, a master swordsman skilled in killing within ten paces, convinced the other warriors to participate in a staged duel with him. His plan was to present their weapons to the king and, under the pretense of having killed them, approach within ten paces of the king to carry out the assassination. Broken Sword, also known as Broken Calligraphy, had learned swordsmanship through the art of calligraphy. From Nameless's narrative, we learn that the reason for their failure to kill the king over the decade was Broken Sword's opposition to the act.

As Nameless approached the king's palace, Broken Sword urged him to abandon his mission. He then wrote two characters in the desert sand and declared, "These two words embody my philosophy." When the king asked Nameless what the characters meant, Nameless replied, "The unification of the country."

In summary, Juhani Pallasmaa's phenomenological concepts in the field of architecture can be categorized into the following key themes, each of which will be elaborated upon:

6.2 | Critique of Visuality

Juhani Pallasmaa [10] emphasizes that architecture should be shaped by human sensory and bodily experiences. He argues that architectural spaces should engage multiple senses, moving beyond a sole focus on visual form to incorporate tactile, auditory, and even olfactory experiences. From Pallasmaa's perspective, architectural philosophy, which aims to address human cognitive needs, is increasingly being reduced to a form of advertising-driven, pleasure-oriented, and consumerist architecture.

Such spaces fail to become vessels for human memories, alienating individuals from their environment and turning them inward. To create enduring and timeless architectural works, it is essential to design spaces that engage all dimensions of human perception. This idea finds profound expression in cinema. In his book *The Eyes of the Skin*, Pallasmaa offers a comprehensive critique of the dominance of visual-centric thinking in 20th-century architecture.

He traces the origins of this visual dominance to the invention of perspective during the Renaissance. Quoting Martin Jay, Pallasmaa contrasts the "clear, linear, solid, fixed, flat, and closed forms of the Renaissance" with the "painterly, deep, softly focused, multiple, and open" qualities of Baroque art. He further argues that the Baroque visual experience possesses a deeply tactile or sensory quality, preventing it from becoming an absolute visual-centric rival to Cartesian perspective [9].

Cinema, as a multifaceted art form, can create a multisensory and embodied experience for the audience through the integration of imagery, sound, and music. This approach not only reflects Pallasmaa's philosophy of multisensory perception but can also be extended to architecture. In the films of Zhang Yimou, this concept is vividly evident. His works provide a rich, multisensory experience for the audience, not only through visual imagery but also through sound, music, and cinematic space. By engaging multiple senses, Zhang's films exemplify how art can transcend visual dominance to create a more immersive and meaningful connection with the viewer.



Fig. 2. Physical experience and the critique of ocularcentrism; the hero by zhang yimou.

Cinema, as a medium, uniquely reconstructs time and space, offering audiences distinct temporal and spatial experiences. Phenomenologists analyze how films create temporal experiences, such as the elongation or compression of time, and spatial experiences, including depth of field or movement within cinematic space. In most scenes of *Hero* (2002), Zhang Yimou pays particular attention to symmetry in the composition of frames as a key element of *mise-en-scène*. Symmetry can be regarded as a hallmark of Zhang's cinematic aesthetic, as it is consistently employed across his films as a functional technique to construct meaning. This visual phenomenology in Zhang's work is deeply inspired by Taoist philosophy, which has historically shaped the social architecture of Chinese society.

From Marshall McLuhan's perspective, a "cool medium" is one that demands high levels of participation from the audience, requiring them to engage multiple senses to fully comprehend the message. Unlike "hot media," which provide detailed descriptions and leave little to the imagination, cool media rely on the audience's active involvement to fill in the gaps and interpret the incomplete information presented [11]. Cinema, as a cool medium, aligns with this framework, and Zhang's visual architecture, influenced by Taoism, places the body and its existential senses—rather than just the eyes—at the center of perceptual experience.

In this context, architecture becomes an art of the body and existential feeling rather than merely a visual art; even sight serves the broader purpose of existential awareness [12].

In Zhang's films, traditional architecture plays a significant role as both an aesthetic and cultural symbol. The natural landscapes and traditional architectural elements in *Hero* reflect the harmony between humans and nature, a core principle of Taoist philosophy that emphasizes alignment with the natural world (*Fig. 3*). Through this interplay of visual symmetry, architectural symbolism, and philosophical undertones, Zhang's work transcends mere storytelling, inviting the audience to engage deeply with the sensory and existential layers of his cinematic world. This approach not only enriches the narrative but also aligns with McLuhan's notion of cinema as a participatory medium, where the audience's imagination and sensory engagement are essential to completing the cinematic experience.



Fig. 3. Visually-centric critique : the hero by zhang yimou.

In *Fig. 2* (left), the hero stands on a road framed by an architectural structure composed of a vast crowd. In this scene, the visual focus serves the hero's existential experience, with the sky symbolizing, in accordance with Taoist philosophy, the will and power of judgment. The hero, having completed his actions, must now face the king's judgment. The hero's body is positioned at the center of the frame, while the road, a mental construct, extends beyond the physical space. The street depicted in the film does not end at the edge of the frame; instead, it expands around the viewer, forming an imaginary network of streets, buildings, and places [1]. This activation of the audience's imagination is a core function of cinema as a cool medium, compelling viewers to engage their senses and imagination to fill in the gaps and uncover hidden meanings, thereby achieving a deeper understanding of the narrative.

6.2.1 | The role of imagination and sensory engagement in Zhang Yimou's cinema

This technique not only enriches the visual aesthetics of the film but also actively involves the audience in the process of interpreting and understanding the cinematic space. Such an approach is particularly evident in the works of Zhang Yimou, whose films are deeply influenced by Taoist philosophy and its emphasis on harmony with nature and the universe. Zhang's cinema reflects Taoist principles through its visual architecture, highlighting the balance between humanity and nature. This philosophical alignment enhances the aesthetic quality of his films while guiding the audience toward a deeper comprehension of the relationships between individuals, nature, and society.

6.2.2 | Architecture as a medium for philosophical and cultural expression

In *Hero*, the architecture of the image serves as a tool for conveying philosophical and cultural concepts, demonstrating Zhang's mastery of both cinematic art and Taoist philosophy. The film's visual composition, with its emphasis on symmetry, color, and traditional elements, transcends mere storytelling, inviting viewers to explore the existential and cultural layers embedded within the narrative. By integrating these elements, Zhang not only creates a visually stunning cinematic experience but also fosters a profound connection between the audience and the philosophical ideals that underpin his work. This synthesis of visual artistry and philosophical depth exemplifies Zhang Yimou's unique contribution to the world of cinema, where the harmony between humanity and nature is not just depicted but deeply felt.

6.3 | Multisensory and Embodied Perception

Cinema is not merely a visual medium; it is also a tactile experience. The textures of the screen, the materiality of the film, and the spatial dynamics of the cinematic environment all contribute to creating a tactile interaction with the viewer. The haptic visuality of film allows us to "touch" the images, to feel the surfaces and spaces that unfold before us [13]. This multisensory engagement transforms the act of viewing into a more immersive and embodied experience, where the boundaries between the visual and the tactile blur.

According to Pallasmaa, every sensory experience in architecture is inherently multisensory. This means that the qualities of materials, space, and scale are perceived simultaneously and harmoniously through various senses, including sight, hearing, smell, touch, taste, and even through the skeletal and muscular systems of the body. Architecture, by encompassing these seven realms of sensory experience, places them in a dynamic interplay where each sense enhances and stimulates the others. This approach provides a deeper understanding of space and a richer human experience of architecture [14].

6.3.1 | The interplay of senses in cinematic and architectural experiences

The multisensory nature of both cinema and architecture underscores the importance of embodied perception. In cinema, the interplay of visual, auditory, and tactile elements creates a holistic experience that engages the viewer on multiple levels. Similarly, in architecture, the integration of sensory stimuli fosters a more profound connection between the individual and the built environment. This dynamic interaction not only enriches the aesthetic experience but also deepens the emotional and psychological impact of the space.

By embracing a multisensory approach, both cinema and architecture transcend their traditional boundaries, offering audiences and inhabitants alike a more immersive and meaningful engagement with the world around them. This alignment of sensory and spatial experiences highlights the interconnectedness of human perception and the environments we inhabit, whether they are constructed through the lens of a camera or the design of a building.



Fig. 4. Sensory perceptions of music and battle, the Hero by Zhang Yimou.

Space, in its essence, is where we exist, providing a philosophical sense of being in the world. In *Fig. 4*, a distinct geographical space is constructed, depicting the battle between two protagonists, Sky and Nameless, accompanied by the musical architecture performed by an elderly man. This creates a multi-sensory perception for the audience, immersing them in the scene (haptic experience) and allowing them to physically feel the intensity of the battle. Zhang Yimou, in his film *Hero*, masterfully combines visual, auditory, and kinetic elements to craft a rich, multi-dimensional experience for the viewer.

Visually, Zhang employs color as a powerful narrative tool. Each color represents a psychological state or a distinct story: red symbolizes love and violence, blue conveys tranquility and truth, while white signifies purity and death. Beyond their visual function, these colors subconsciously engage the audience with deeper emotions and meanings. The film's score, composed by Tan Dun, blends traditional Chinese instruments with modern orchestration, enhancing the multi-sensory atmosphere of the scenes and playing a pivotal role in advancing the narrative and evoking emotions. Ambient sounds, such as the rustling of wind, whispers of

leaves, and the flow of water, add depth to the film's environment, immersing the viewer sensorially into its world.

Juhani Pallasmaa [14] explores the role of the body and movement in spatial perception, explaining how architecture can create a multi-sensory experience through interaction with various senses. This perspective highlights how architecture transcends visual dimensions, emerging as a multi-sensory phenomenon [14]. In *Hero*, the martial arts movements are not only visually stunning and harmonious but also carry symbolic meanings. The fluid motion of the camera physically engages the viewer, fostering a sense of presence and participation in the scene.

The phenomenology of film emphasizes that watching a movie is not merely a mental activity but a bodily experience. The viewer engages with the film through their senses—sight, hearing, and even kinesthetic perception. In the river sequence (*Fig. 4*), Zhang uses camera movement and rhythmic editing to elicit physical reactions, such as muscle tension, in the audience. Pallasmaa, based on the concept of sensory integration in architectural experience, poses a thought-provoking question: why do cold, abandoned houses exude the same scent of death everywhere? He further asks: Is the smell we perceive, in fact, created by our eyes? [9].

Through this intricate interplay of visual, auditory, and kinetic elements, Zhang Yimou's *Hero* transcends traditional storytelling, offering a profound, multi-sensory cinematic experience that deeply resonates with the audience.

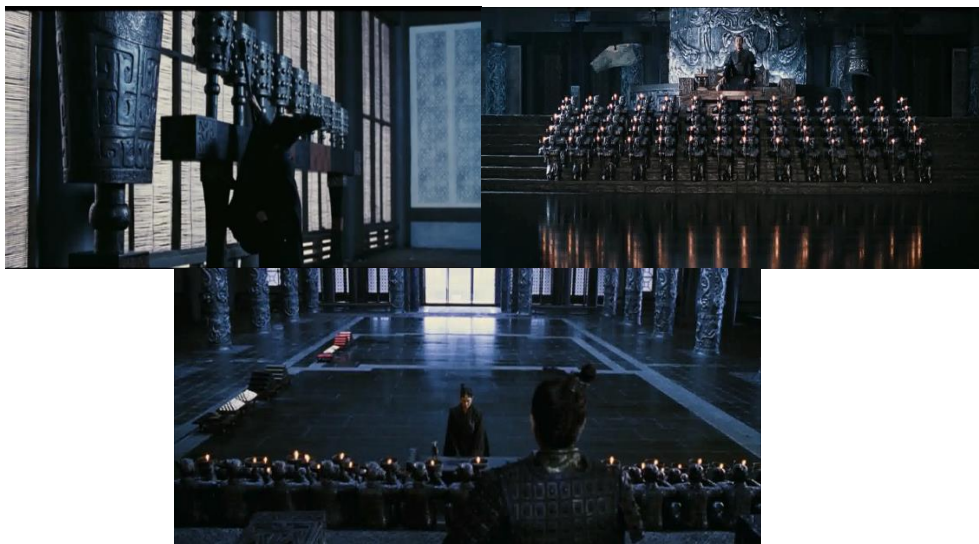


Fig. 5. Multisensory perceptions of social architecture., the Hero by Zhang Yimou.

In *Fig. 5*, the king is positioned at an elevated level, with the light from the candles creating a symbolic distance between him and the character "Nameless." The coldness of the stone flooring reflects the class divisions prevalent in ancient Chinese society, a concept deeply intertwined with the social architecture of that era. The candlelight and its reflection on the hall's floor evoke a sense of enlightenment and awareness in the king, symbolizing his visionary ideals—specifically, the unification of the nation.

Before the character "Nameless" enters the king's hall, a man rings bells to announce the hero's arrival. This auditory element serves not only a practical function but also carries significant symbolic weight. In contemporary architecture, there is a heightened focus on the principles of Feng Shui. Wind chimes and bells, which resonate with the breeze, hold a prominent place in Feng Shui art and are believed to attract positive energy and good fortune. According to Chinese beliefs, when a bell rings, it generates a sonic current that connects the heavens with the realm of the deceased, and this connection occurs within an earthly space. Consequently, the sound of bells simultaneously embodies elements of sanctity, goodness, and evil. The Chinese hold that if bells are hung in homes for specific Feng Shui purposes but are not activated by a Taoist priest or an expert, they may become conduits for malevolent spirits infiltrating the household.

The architecture of these spaces, combined with chiaroscuro lighting, evokes a multitude of sensory impressions—power, danger, deception, and death—in the viewer's mind. These elements collectively create a rich, multidimensional spatial experience that is profoundly impactful both aesthetically and symbolically. The interplay of light, sound, and materiality crafts an immersive narrative, inviting the audience to engage with the scene on multiple sensory and intellectual levels.

6.4 | Silence and Slowness

People must learn to seek the Tao, even though the Tao cannot be directly perceived or experienced through the senses. The Tao cannot be seen or touched, yet its presence permeates all existence. According to Laozi, the first Taoist sage, people distance themselves from the Tao when they prioritize false pursuits such as power, success, and education [2]. In essence, Taoist principles invite individuals toward tranquility and stillness. To achieve this serenity, Taoists practice meditation, and the concept of "Wu Wei" or the philosophy of "non-action" stems from this ideology. The heavens and the earth possess a magnificent beauty, yet they do not speak of it. The four seasons follow their natural course, yet they remain silent about it [2].

Similarly, Pallasmaa, like the Taoists, calls us toward an "architecture of silence." He believes that stillness and inner peace are the most vital auditory experiences that architecture, as the art of frozen silence, can create [9]. By proposing the idea of an architecture of silence—both abstract and sensory—he argues that architecture should slow down the pace of experience and increase the time for reflection. This deliberate deceleration allows individuals to engage more deeply with their surroundings, fostering a sense of mindfulness and connection to the present moment.

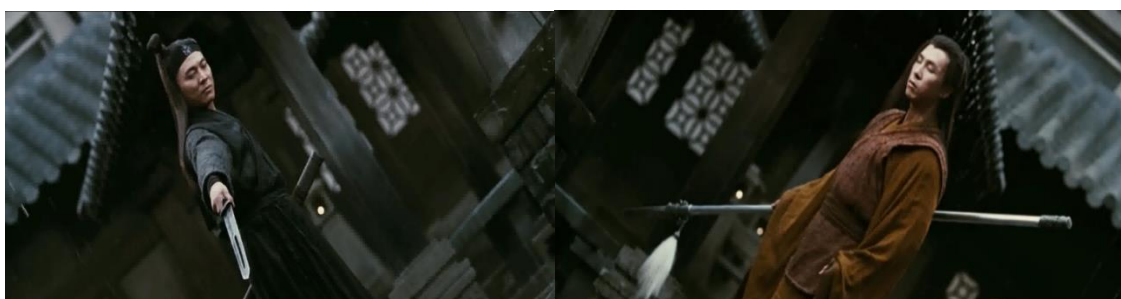


Fig. 6. Silence and "Wu Wei, the Hero by Zhang Yimou.

In cinema (*Fig. 6*), silence conveys the inner states of characters during pivotal and decisive moments. In such instances, the director employs inner sound to create a deeper emotional impact on the audience. In the scene of the duel between the two main characters, "Sky" and "Nameless," by the river, after a brief skirmish, both realize that continuing the physical fight is futile. As the old man begins to play music, they enter a state of "Wu Wei" and continue their battle in silence. The black-and-white architecture of this scene intertextually references silent cinema, where the relationship between silence, music, and the architectural sensibility of space is particularly emphasized. Black-and-white cinema cultivates a heightened sense of tactile perception, allowing the viewer to experience the space more profoundly.

Tom Gunning, in his theory of the "Cinema of Attractions," argues that early cinema (up to around 1906) focused more on spectacle and awe than on narrative storytelling. According to him, films of this period resembled magic shows or emerging technologies that directly engaged the audience (Gunning, 1986). Inspired by Gunning's ideas and the traditions of circus and Beijing opera, Zhang Yimou challenges the conventional approach to martial arts films, demonstrating that this genre (Wuxia) can create direct and exhilarating experiences for the viewer. In *Hero*, Zhang's camera, with its oblique angles and central framing of the characters' bodies, creates a narrative entanglement even in silence. By using multiple angles to depict a single location and employing *mise-en-scène* of silence, Zhang crafts an architectural slowness through elements such as rain. Ultimately, by combining various structures and multiple narratives from the king and

"Nameless," the juxtaposition of two attractions (visual spectacles) generates a third meaning—one that does not reside within the individual attractions but is actively constructed by the viewer.

In *Hero*, silence is not merely the absence of sound but the creation of a space that invites contemplation and reflection. Scenes where movements slow down or the camera lingers on a subject create a form of visual silence. This silence allows the viewer to grasp deeper emotions and meanings behind the heroes' battle. From Juhani Pallasmaa's perspective, silence is a space where other senses—particularly sight and touch—are heightened. He states, "I have always been against the secondary use of film scores. What I oppose is not allowing silence to find its place in the work. Silence is what should fill the so-called narrative voids"[1]. The slow-motion movements of the camera in martial arts scenes serve as tools for sensory engagement and reflection on beauty and violence. Through this aesthetic slow motion, the audience experiences time differently. In essence, the elongation of time allows the viewer to focus on details and connect more deeply with the film's message.

In the modern world, we often rush past our surroundings without the opportunity to touch, feel, or understand them. Slowing down and reflecting enables us to engage with the world on a deeper level [9]. Zhang Yimou employs Eastern aesthetics of silence as a valuable element (rooted in Taoist principles) to invite the audience to meditate on the essence of the film. This approach encourages viewers to pause and reflect on the deeper meaning of events rather than rushing through the scenes. By integrating silence and slowness, Zhang creates a cinematic experience that transcends mere visual spectacle, offering a profound and meditative engagement with the narrative.

6.5 | Imagination and Embodied Memory

The home serves as a sanctuary for imagination, offering protection to the dreamer and allowing individuals to engage in reverie within a space of peace and tranquility [15]. According to Pallasmaa, space, matter, and time converge into a unified entity in the context of memory-evoking architectural experiences. These elements, akin to the fundamental substance of existence, become deeply interwoven with our consciousness. This is because we come to recognize ourselves through specific places that have transformed into the very fabric of our being, shaping our lived reality [10].



Fig. 7. The art of swordsmanship, embodied memory· the Hero by Zhang Yimou.

The narrative structure of Zhang Yimou's *Hero* is intricately built around the use of color. Each segment of the story is dominated by a specific hue—red, blue, green, and white—which serves to embody the sensory and visceral memories of the characters. These colors not only frame the visual aesthetics of the film but also evoke the emotional and psychological states of the protagonists. The choreography of the fight scenes, with their fluid and deliberate movements, further reflects the inner turmoil, aspirations, and imaginations of the characters, creating a profound connection between physical action and emotional depth.

In the film, the character Broken Sword learns the art of swordsmanship through calligraphy. At one hour and eight minutes into the film, Broken Sword explains to Nameless that he and Flying Snow practiced calligraphy to innovate their swordsmanship techniques. From his perspective, the essence of calligraphy and swordsmanship is nearly identical. This connection becomes evident when Flying Snow questions Broken Sword about his decision not to kill the King, to which he responds, "The King must not be killed. This is

what the art of calligraphy has taught me” (*Fig. 7*). Through this interplay, Zhang Yimou draws the audience’s attention to the philosophical underpinnings of the narrative, aligning with Husserl’s notion of intentionality, where consciousness is always directed toward an object. In the context of the film, this intentionality manifests as a reciprocal relationship between the viewer and the imagery, where the audience actively interprets the visuals while the film simultaneously shapes their awareness.

In one pivotal scene, Broken Sword writes two characters for Nameless (*Fig. 7*, right), which he describes as embodying his philosophy. These characters carry a profound meaning: the unity of the nation. The King later elaborates that Broken Sword did not merely demonstrate a swordsmanship technique in this scene but articulated the ideals of the art. The first ideal is the unity of the swordsman and the sword, where mastery is achieved to such an extent that even a blade of dry grass can become a lethal weapon. The second ideal is the internalization of the sword within the swordsman’s spirit, enabling them to defeat an opponent even without a physical weapon. However, the ultimate ideal transcends these: the swordsman must empty both their hands and spirit of the sword. In this state, the swordsman attains a state of perfect tranquility and mastery, known as *wu wei*.

The film *Hero* also makes extensive use of China’s natural landscapes and traditional architecture, which are not merely decorative backdrops but integral to the embodied experiences of the characters. These spaces serve as extensions of the characters’ inner worlds, reflecting their emotional states and philosophical journeys. Through this interplay of color, movement, and environment, Zhang Yimou crafts a cinematic experience that is both visually stunning and deeply introspective, inviting the audience to engage with the film on multiple levels—sensory, emotional, and intellectual.

In summary, *Hero* is a masterful exploration of the interplay between art, memory, and philosophy, where the boundaries between physical action, emotional expression, and spiritual ideals are seamlessly blurred. The film’s use of color, choreography, and landscape creates a rich tapestry that not only tells a story but also invites the audience to reflect on the deeper meanings of unity, mastery, and transcendence.



Fig. 8. Embodied imagination and memory, the *Hero* by Zhang Yimou.

Pallasmaa argues that spaces and places possess the profound ability to evoke memories and foster a sense of belonging and identity. A specific scent, for instance, can unconsciously transport us to a space long forgotten by visual memory. The nostrils awaken a forgotten image, inviting us into a vivid dream. As Pallasmaa observes, “The nose makes the eyes remember. Memory and imagination remain interconnected” [9]. Natural spaces, such as mountains and deserts (*Fig. 8*), serve as powerful symbols of collective and historical memories. In this way, the martial movements depicted in *Hero* through swordsmanship are not merely physical actions but embodied memories, etched into the body through touch and reenacted in another time.

The practice of calligraphy in *Hero* exemplifies the representation of such tactile memories. The sense of touch connects us to time and tradition: through tactile sensations, we shake hands with the countless generations that came before us. A pebble polished by waves, for instance, becomes a testament to the passage of time and the enduring presence of nature’s touch [9]. In the film, this connection is vividly illustrated as the characters engage with their environment, their bodies, and their tools, creating a dialogue between the past and the present.

The film's emphasis on embodied memory is further highlighted through its use of natural landscapes and traditional practices. These elements are not merely decorative but serve as active participants in the narrative, shaping the characters' experiences and grounding their actions in a deeper, almost spiritual, context. The mountains and deserts, for example, are not just backdrops but symbols of resilience, continuity, and the collective memory of a culture. In *Hero*, the interplay between touch, memory, and imagination is masterfully woven into the fabric of the story. The characters' movements, whether in combat or calligraphy, are imbued with a sense of history and tradition, reflecting the idea that the body itself is a repository of memory. Through this lens, the film transcends its visual and narrative elements, inviting the audience to engage with the story on a sensory and emotional level. In conclusion, Zhang Yimou's *Hero* is a profound exploration of embodied memory and imagination, where the physical and the metaphysical converge. The film's use of natural landscapes, tactile practices, and symbolic actions creates a rich tapestry that not only tells a story but also evokes a deeper connection to the past, the present, and the enduring human spirit. Through its emphasis on touch and memory, *Hero* reminds us that our bodies are not merely vessels for action but also carriers of history, tradition, and meaning.

6.6 | Atmosphere and the Non-Priority of Form

Peter Zumthor eloquently describes what truly constitutes an architectural atmosphere: "It is the density and the unique mood, this sense of presence, well-being, harmony, and beauty... under its influence, I experience something that I would not otherwise experience in the same way" [16].

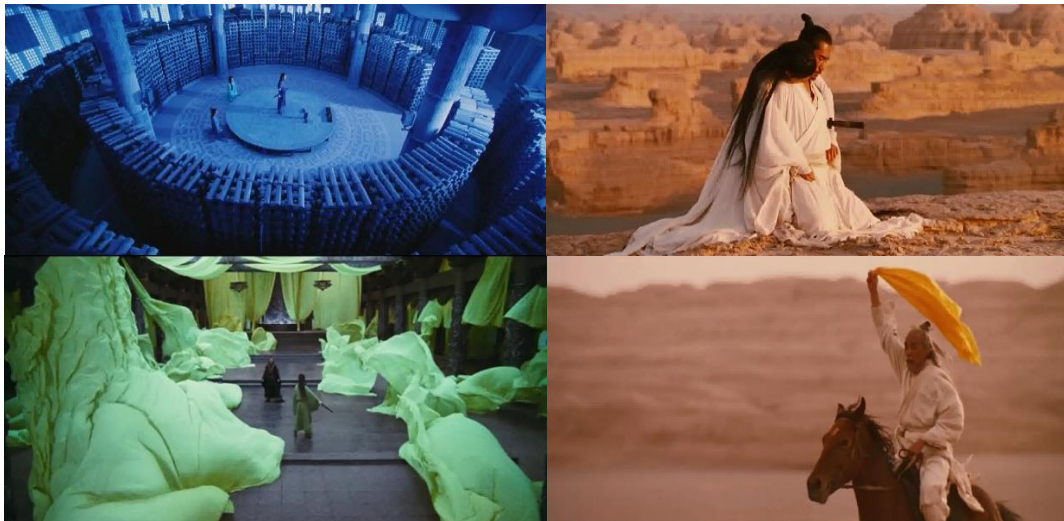


Fig. 9. Color and atmosphere, the *Hero* by Zhang Yimou.

6.6.1 | Color and atmosphere in Zhang Yimou's *Hero*: a cinematic exploration

Pallasmaa argues that atmosphere is not solely created through form or structure but is shaped by elements such as light, color, texture, sound, and even silence. In Zhang Yimou's film *Hero*, colors are used symbolically to evoke distinct atmospheres, aligning closely with Pallasmaa's perspective. Zhang employs minimalist and simple forms, yet these forms alone do not define the visual and sensory experience of the film. Instead of emphasizing intricate architectural details or complex set designs, the film focuses on the interplay of colors, choreographed movements, and music, all of which contribute to a multisensory experience. Architecture, as Pallasmaa [9] suggests, allows us to understand the dialectic between stability and change, situate ourselves in the world, and position ourselves within the continuity of culture and time. It reveals and structures power dynamics, social and cultural order, interaction and separation, identity, and memory. The concept of atmosphere, as its literal meaning implies, is closely tied to weather. Pallasmaa uses it to describe the immediate, emotional, and existential perceptions evoked by architectural spaces [16].

In Taoist philosophy, colors are often associated with natural elements such as water, fire, wood, metal, and earth. In *Hero*, these colors are deliberately employed in the film's architecture and set design. Red, blue, green, and white each symbolize different concepts—love, loyalty, tranquility, and purity—reflecting Taoist principles and constructing a geometry of emotion. In the atmospheric imagery of the film, the circle, a symbol of Yin and Yang (complementary forces) in Taoist philosophy, is accentuated by the tonalities of blue, evoking an emotional atmosphere within the architectural composition. Blue, spiritually active and reminiscent of the natural force of winter, dominates these scenes. White, the most evocative color symbolically, is prominently featured in the sequences depicting the deaths of “Broken Sword” and “Flying Snow.” Combined with the gray desert in the background, it creates one of the film's most visually striking moments, injecting profound expression into the narrative. The long robes worn by the two protagonists transform them into angelic figures, symbolizing that the ultimate virtue of unifying the nation (or human existence) is realized within the human heart.

It is worth noting that in ancient China, court officials were referred to as shamans. In *Hero*, the character “Nameless” becomes a shaman when he encounters the yellow flag, embodying the highest virtues. Yellow, the brightest and most radiant color, symbolically represents wisdom and understanding. Through this color, Nameless attains a deep comprehension of the word *jian* (sword). Green, symbolizing growth and flourishing, is another primary color in Taoist thought. Through his architectural use of color, Zhang Yimou visually, emotionally, and symbolically draws the audience closer to the film's central atmosphere: unity and flourishing.

6.6.2 | Emphasis on touch and hapticity

In his book *The Thinking Hand*, Pallasmaa highlights the primacy and superiority of the sense of touch over other senses, extending this concept more broadly to the idea of “hapticity.” He introduces hapticity within three primary domains: the form of contact, the image of muscle and bone, and corporeal understanding [10]. Pallasmaa argues that all senses, including vision, are extensions of the sense of touch. In other words, touch, as the foundational sense, plays a crucial role in how we perceive and interact with the world.



Fig. 10. The Sword and the haptic power· the Hero by Zhang Yimou.

Touch and movement share a reciprocal relationship, each influencing the other. Pallasmaa introduces the concept of Sensory Wisdom, arguing that human intelligence is not confined to the mind alone; rather, the body possesses its own form of intelligence, shaped through sensory and physical experiences [10]. For instance, the movement elicited by variations in the tactile qualities of a surface, or the tactile sensations evoked by the motion of muscles and tendons, exemplify this interplay. Touch is a somatic sense that lacks a specialized organ; instead, it is experienced through the entire body, particularly the skin. However, Pallasmaa

distinguishes between touch and hapticity. He views hapticity from an existential perspective, considering it an experience of the self. The haptic experience, as the most significant human sense, is a synthesis of all sensory modalities, shaping the essence of atmosphere within a specific place and moment [10].

In *Hero*, the movement of silk fabrics in the wind conveys the softness and delicacy of “Broken Sword’s” thoughts (*Fig. 10*). Phenomenology emphasizes the concept of the lifeworld—the pre-theoretical, lived world we inhabit. Films can reflect the director’s lifeworld and, through the representation of reality, explore human experiences. In Zhang Yimou’s *Hero*, the sword emerges as the most haptic form of architectural imagery. This symbolic tool simultaneously embodies power, anger, vengeance, love, embodied memory (such as calligraphy), the flourishing of thought, national unity, and even pain.

7 | Conclusion

In this study, we have employed Juhani Pallasmaa’s theoretical framework to conduct a phenomenological analysis of the architectural imagery in Zhang Yimou’s film *Hero* (2002). Pallasmaa critiques the visual-centric approach in architecture and cinema, emphasizing instead the importance of multisensory and embodied perception, including touch, hapticity, embodied imagination, and sensory memory. These concepts are profoundly reflected in *Hero*. Through elements such as water, the sword, symmetry, and balance, the film creates a formless and shapeless atmosphere that transcends purely visual forms. This atmosphere, rooted in multisensory and embodied perception, enriches the viewer’s sensory experiences and activates embodied imagination and memory.

While light and color dominate visually in the film, they serve as complements to haptic and tactile experiences, deepening the viewer’s engagement with the architectural imagery. By prioritizing atmosphere over form, Zhang Yimou embodies Pallasmaa’s view of architecture as a multisensory and embodied phenomenon. This approach not only fosters a deeper connection between the viewer and the cinematic space but also enables the creation of pure and impactful visual spaces that resonate with the viewer’s imagination and memory.

The integration of Pallasmaa’s phenomenological theories with Zhang Yimou’s architectural imagery in *Hero* demonstrates the potential of multisensory and embodied perception in cinematic architecture. This synergy not only enriches the viewer’s experience but also opens new possibilities for creating evocative and meaningful visual spaces in cinema. By applying principles of multisensory perception, embodied memory, and atmospheric design, filmmakers can move beyond the limitations of visual-centric and form-driven approaches, achieving a deeper and more holistic interaction with architectural imagery in cinema.

This analysis emphasizes how cinema’s timeless task is to create embodied, lived metaphors that give shape to our existence in the world. These metaphors reflect and immortalize the architecture of ideas and images of an ideal life. Through Zhang’s architectural imagery, we can structure, understand, and remember the formless flow of reality, ultimately helping us recognize and recall our true selves.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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