

Comparing imagery in *The Greedy Hippo* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*

Author:John R. Botha¹**Affiliation:**

¹School of Communication Studies (Art History and Film Studies), North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

Correspondence to:

John Botha

Email:

ksgjrb@puknet.puk.ac.za

Postal address:

Private Bag X6001,
Potchefstroom 2520,
South Africa

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This article used as point of departure the *Ngano* song-story entitled *The Greedy Hippo* as developed by Christiaan van der Westhuizen and based on the Tambani embroidery project. This animated interpretation of *The Greedy Hippo* is used to further the aims of interdisciplinary research as stated by the original project by comparing its fantasy imagery with that of the Chinese film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* by director Ang Lee. The analysis of the images in both works of art has been based on Jungian archetypes, with specific reference to the need for an esoteric and imaginative reading of fantasy in the chosen works of art. Reference was made to the dominant role of realism as style in Western art as opposed to the more esoteric, symbolic, and fantasy imagery of the art of other cultures, with emphasis on China. Chinese landscape painting and even poetry has been briefly contextualised with regards to the chosen works of art. Finally, the different characters of both works of art were analysed within the contexts of their symbolic meanings as based on Jungian archetypes, with particular reference to the scenes where the characters are depicted as flying through the air, which were explained within the contexts of *Wu Xia* martial arts style films.

Beeldvergeelyking in *Greedy Hippo* en *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Hierdie artikel neem as vertrekpunt die *Ngano*-sangstorie getiteld die *Greedy Hippo* (Die Hebsugtige Seekoei) soos ontwikkel deur Christiaan van der Westhuizen en gebaseer op die Tambani borduurprojek. Die tekenfilm as interpretasie van die *Greedy Hippo* word aangewend om interdisiplinêre navorsing as doelstelling te verwesenlik, deur die fantasiebeelding in hierdie tekenfilm te vergelyk met dié in die Sjinese film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Jungiaanse argetipes word gebruik vir die analise van visuele beelde, met spesifieke verwysing na die noodsaaklikheid vir 'n esoteriese en verbeeldingryke interpretasie van die fantasiebeelding in die gekose kunswerke. Daar word na die dominante rol van realisme as stylneiging binne Westerse kuns verwys, in kontras met 'n meer esoteriese, simboliese en selfs fantasie-gerigte beeldgebruik in die kuns van ander kulture, met klem op Sjina. Die landskapkuns en selfs poësie van Sjina word bondig met betrekking tot die gekose kunswerke gekontekstualiseer. Ten slotte word die verskillende karakters binne beide kunswerke in samehang met hul simboliese betekenis en in konteks van Jungiaanse argetipes ontleed. Dit word gedoen met spesifieke verwysing na hul uitbeelding in tonele waar hulle deur die lug sweef, soos verklaar word deur verwysing na die *Wu Xia*-styl van gevegskunsrolprente.

Introduction and context

In the introduction to the catalogue of the project known as the *Transgressions and boundaries of the page* the authors (Greyling, Marley & Combrink 2011:5) point out that one of the objectives of this project was to create opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration, and the possibility to select aspects of the project as a spring board for such interdisciplinary research. In comparing two disparate art works, one from the *Transgressions and boundaries of the page* project, the other being the internationally renowned film, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* by Chinese director Ang Lee, the identification of a number of common denominators pointed to challenging research.

In both cases the methods of storytelling depend on figures flying through space, as can be seen in the first example, taken from the animated version of the story of *The Greedy Hippo*. This animation by Christiaan van der Westhuizen (2010) is based on the Tambani embroidery project (Greyling, Marley & Combrink; Tambani 2010) and makes use of the original concept as told by the Venda women of the Limpopo Province. It may seem that any of numerous other texts, involving moving images were possibilities for this research. These would include feature films ranging from superheroes such as Superman, Spiderman and Hulk to other animated characters such as Bart Simpson, Dragon Ball Z, or even those by the Disney studios. One distinguishing feature regarding the texts selected for this research is that they were chosen

because of particular common denominators embedded in ancient beliefs. Whilst these beliefs may seem to stretch the imagination of the contemporary viewer, it is because of their place, embedded in ancient customs, that the comparison of these two texts is valid, or, as Hayles (1999:192) stated: every epoch has its beliefs, widely accepted by contemporaries, that appear fantastic to later generations.

Further common denominators within *The Greedy Hippo*, as developed from the Tambani project and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, focus on the portrayal of character types and their choreographic movements within denoted spaces, whether based on graphic design animation or cinematic direction. It is particularly the esoteric qualities of these physical actions by heroes, villains and victims in these two stories that are an interesting and valid opportunity for interdisciplinary research and textual comparison, even whilst dealing with two such diverse art forms. Both of these tales have origins in the traditions of mythical narrative and a rich history of allegorical folklore. Both works have gone through a variety of disparate mutations and translations from the original, and it is significant that in both cases the artists (Van der Westhuizen & Lee) have chosen to include paranormal actions and scenes that can hardly be interpreted as anything but esoteric.

Therefore, by investigating the elements of fantasy and the common denominators in the subject matter and content of both stories, this article stresses the need for an esoteric interpretation of these stories whilst using, as a point of departure, their shared aesthetic principles. These include aspects of both form and content, such as the movement of shapes within pictorial composition and the interpretation thereof, in terms of motives and meanings. Both art works suggest an element of intermediality (Semali & Pailliotet 1999:57), where the viewer is expected to be capable of 'making connections across a convergence of various media', including embroidery, animation, Wu Xia-style acting and so called wire-work within the motion picture. It seemed that the common denominators as mentioned above, with particular reference to *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, enhanced the stated principle of intertextual and interdisciplinary research.

Stories and the esoteric as the antithesis of stylistic realism

The origins of both *Greedy Hippo* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* can be found in the folklore of their respective localities of origin, namely Africa and China. In both cases this folklore, sometimes seen as mythology (Drake 1969:122–123), must be read as texts containing more than mere mythology, with even the fantasies embedded therein connected in many ways to ancient religious beliefs (see also Smith, 2008:103). This is true not only for Africa (Mutwa 1998:xvii–xxi; Cavendish 1980:58), but finds particular resonance in the contemporary interest in what is termed by Zhang (2005:264) to be *filmic folklore*, with particular reference to the diverse approaches to methods of storytelling in contemporary Chinese films. Both texts have been developed further (Sullivan, 2001:284) using the original fantasies and

landscapes from which they stem, to be transformed into contemporary works of art, whilst retaining something of the essence of their earlier origins. In the case of *The Greedy Hippo* its origin is in the *Ngano* texts dating from pre-colonial times when these stories were performed as songs, whilst *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is embedded in Chinese religious beliefs found in their Zodiac and further developed in common usage as idiomatic expression (Fazzioli 1986:163–164; Chan 2004:6).

The Greedy Hippo, although executed in its final format as an animated story, cannot be divorced completely from the embroidered version as seen in the Tambani project, because the rich textures of the stitches and even the craft-like portrayal of chosen depictions form an important backdrop or landscape that had a decisive influence on how the technique of animation was rendered, with particular reference to the eventual relative simplicity of style (Herman, Jahn & Ryan 2005:23).

On the other hand, Wang Du Lu, the original writer of the book on which *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is based, wrote sixteen novels altogether in the so-called *Wu Xia*-style. The film itself is based on the fourth of five novels collectively called the Crane - Iron Pentalogy, which describes a number of linked stories of passion, love and enmity which spanned three generations set in the late Qing Dynasty (1644–1911). The genre in Chinese film and literature called 'Wu Xia' conveys the key to conceptual understanding of the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. The *Wu Xia* warriors are a class of knights that make their appearance in Chinese literature as early as the time of Confucius (551–479BC). They include the Western concept of chivalry, in common with myths surrounding characters like Merlin, King Arthur, Lancelot and the Knights of the Round Table, including characteristics such as extraordinary bravery, strength of character, resilience in battle, and more often than not a desire to perform good deeds (Klein 2004:25).

These fables are romanticised fantasy and fiction in which heroes and villains alike are expected to have a complete and sometimes even magical mastery of the martial arts, powers of levitation and the ability to show amazing strength, speed and even flight. Many films in China have been made in the *Wu Xia* style over the past decades, but none with greater worldwide success than *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Lee 2002; Klein 2004:18), which is perhaps partly the result of Hollywood influences in this film (Chung 2007:127-129). In all these films the martial arts of China play such a central role, that the films themselves are now called *Wu Xia* films, or more popularly, *wire-fu*. This term refers to the so-called wire work that makes the acrobatic movement of the actors seem weightless and feasible (Liu 2008:396), enabling them to perform amazing feats such as fighting or flying through the air whilst suspended from wires.

As such the martial arts or *kung fu*, in conjunction with other ancient arts, especially songs, poetry, painting and even calligraphy (Zhang 2005:50), form not only the 'landscape' but also a common frame of reference regarding the works

of art chosen for discussion in this article. It is said that in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* Ang Lee actually sought to render a 'dream' China (Klein 2004:23) by evoking a particular moment in the evolution of the martial arts as a genre, which is, stylistically, strongly in contrast with the evolution of Western art. Even so, Ang Lee himself, whilst underlining the inherent Chinese qualities of the film, admits that the reader should use Western methods to understand the film:

With *Crouching Tiger*, for example, the subtext is very purely Chinese. But you have to use Freudian or western techniques to dissect what I think is hidden in a repressed society – the sexual tension, the prohibited feelings. Otherwise you don't get that deep. (Chan 2004:6)

The reference to Freud in this quote is in itself a valuable pointer paving the way for the application of Jung in this article, particularly as he moved beyond Freud in his theories regarding the unconscious. Whereas Freud tended to be increasingly dogmatic (Sayers 2007:29) in his references and use of his Oedipus and castration complex constructions and applying his theories in the analysis and deconstruction of behaviour, Jung's approach was different. He preferred to focus on the development of an all-inclusive Self. As Hagood (2006) puts it:

The unconscious to Freud was the repressed memory and desire, both libidinous and aggressive. Jung included the collective archetypes, our mythological heritage, with the repressed in the unconscious, the most significant archetype being the Self, of which the ego is but a small player. (p. 161)

Considering the role of the viewer in contemplating the chosen works of art in this article, it is therefore of particular value to understand that Jung's approach to the mythical was not the 'Freudian repository of the imprisoned, anti-social drives but a positively charged storehouse of innately unconscious 'archetypes', or sides of the personality, that have simply never had an opportunity at being realised' (Herman, Jahn & Ryan 2005:334). It is also true that Jung often emphasised religion, an aspect of the psyche that connects in a positive way with both the ancient religious beliefs, mentioned above, as well as the nature of mythical experience. As Singh (2009) states:

Indeed, the very experience of cinema itself supports a powerful argument suggesting that the essentially religious experiences Jung returns to time and again in his classical formulae are still very much a part of everyday engagement with our stories and myths. (p. 247)

The 'final redemption' referred to in the conclusion to this article is therefore a logical result of the positive charge that the message in the myth portrays, as embedded in the idea of self-realisation (Herman, Jahn & Ryan 2005:334).

When Hagood (2006:161) continues by stating that, in the minds of shamanistic practitioners, the imaginal could be deemed a reality that parallels the concrete, or 'the realms of the soul', he emphasises the fact that we 'have a dream body that navigates the imaginal as our physical occupies the concrete'. Whilst referring to this as the parallel worlds 'between the concrete earth and the spiritual sky', the reference to shamanistic practitioners allows for the historical and cross cultural link to be made with artists throughout humankind's artistic evolution (Rountree 2008:123–124). In

retrospect the development or evolution of artistic styles often happened by way of contrast, with the fantasy worlds of the imagination mostly seen as the opposite of the quest for *mimesis* (Marien & Fleming 2005:53). Whilst the art of the West traditionally evolved along this basic principle of the pursuit of realism as stylistic approach, as based on Greek humanism, idealism, rationalism and eventually realism (Marien & Fleming 2005:52–59, 82) and continued intermittently until the nineteenth, this is not the case for either African or Chinese art. In both cases symbolism and an acceptance of the power of subject matter to move beyond the borders of a realistic or rational world, form intrinsic aspects of the artists' approach to their subject matter. By doing this they often transcended the borders of physical reality. In this increasingly esoteric interpretation of stylistic rendering fantasy as mode of expression becomes the antithesis of realism, with even the film director sometimes described as an artist as shaman (Rountree 2008:124).

Fantasy and imagination: From mythology to Carl Jung

The initial predilection of Western art towards realism (Honour & Fleming 2002:473) changed gradually as it moved towards the nineteenth century. In one of the earliest examples realism is contradicted by the oeuvre of Hieronymous Bosch (c.1450–1516) as a 'startling departure' from the conventions of realistic painting (De Tolnay 1966:5–6). Three centuries later the darkly imaginative works by Fuseli and Piranesi (Clark 1976:45–67), as well as the naive paintings of Henri Rousseau (Arnason 1998:81) add to the list of artists who broke with the dictates of realism.

Yet, many other cultures including those of the East (Kleiner 2011; 183–202, 210–220), as well as civilizations of the Americas (Maya, Aztec, Inca) (Anton & Dockstader 1968:14–129), and others such as the Inuit (Kleiner 2011; 866) based their art on a non-realistic approach. This is also predominantly the case in Africa (Herold 1990:8–34), where, perhaps with the exception of the sculptural work of the idealised and lifelike style of the Ife in Nigeria (Kleiner 2011:398), depictions in art works were seldom realistic. Because these works were mostly in service of religion, they were subject to symbolic meaning and depended primarily on transcendental and esoteric interpretations. In these works audience participation (Martin & Jacobus 1978:57) becomes important, and it is expected of the viewer to use his or her imagination in order to actively engage through the work of art with the ancestor spirits, and to tap into the unconscious in order to find explanations for the understanding of such works of art. This leads to the possibility of a Jungian approach to explain the elements of imagination, fantasy and methods that use both conscious and unconscious aspects of the mind in looking at a work of art (Gaarden 2005:22). This is achieved by moving between the 'rational and irrational axes' of opposite psychological types (Beebe 2007:52), also described by Jung (Miller 2004:ix) as the transcendent function of the psyche.

After Carl Jung's historic break with Sigmund Freud in 1912–13, his auto-didactic process of self-healing (as explicated in a 1925 seminar) describes a 'rediscovery' of

the symbolic play of childhood 'in which he journeyed back through time by returning in his imagination to earlier childhood and enacting his fantasies through symbolic play' (Jung 1997:2). In the introduction to Jung's writings on the active imagination Chodorow (Jung 1997:2) explains that for Jung it was as if he was 'dropping down into the depths' of his childhood imaginings and fantasies, and he 'began to explore the strange inner landscape where he met the first of a long series of inner figures. These fantasies seemed to personify his fears and other powerful emotions'. This could well constitute Jung's earliest conception of the archetypes. For the purposes of this article the role of the imagination in the understanding of the archetypes is pivotal. In 1921 Jung wrote:

Every good idea and all creative work are the offspring of the imagination, and have their source in what one is pleased to call infantile fantasy. Not the artist alone, but every creative individual whatsoever owes all that is greatest in his life to fantasy. (Jung 1997:5)

According to Chodorow (Jung 1997:6), Jung distinguishes between active and passive attitudes towards one's fantasies, explaining that an active fantasy may be evoked when we turn our attention toward the unconscious with an attitude of expectation; it is the expectation that something definite is about to happen. In this state new energy and a heightened sense of consciousness allow the dreamer to make concrete the fantasy, so that themes are elaborated through association with parallel elements, because with a passive attitude towards fantasy nothing happens. Jung also believed that the psychic and the material are but two sides of the same reality (Gaarden 2005:20), thereby diminishing the gap between fantasy and reality. Jung (1997:89) later refers to an aspect of dreams that contained what he called 'unconscious metaphysics', by which he means 'mythological analogies that were sometimes incredibly strange and baffling'. Martin and Jacobus (1978:440) refer in particular to the role of myth and the collective unconscious in appreciating the work of art. Regarding this Jung (1964:58) says: 'When myths integrate aspects of our collective unconscious into the plot, often the most visible sign of this integration is the appearance of archetypes'. According to Jung, archetypes are 'the tendency to form such representations of a motif – representations that can vary a great deal in detail without losing their basic pattern' (Jung 1964:58).

Vigilant Citizen (2010:1), in attempting what is termed an esoteric interpretation of the film *Pan's Labyrinth*, uses the word *resonate* when referring to the notion that the presence of archetypal myths and symbols interact deeply in the collective and personal unconscious. According to Goldberg (2010:8) Jung believes that the archetypes are the same on an unconscious level across individuals, cultures and societies. He also speculates on how these archetypes manifest in different myths and the extent to which there could be variations. In his work, Jung describes how manifestations of the same set of archetypes could appear across cultures that had no prior contact with each other, as well as across individuals who had never encountered the archetypes (Goldberg 2010:8–9).

In their preface to *The Flamboyant Rooster and other Tshivenda song-stories*, Kruger and Le Roux (2007:7) write that class, patriarchy, seniority and physical power are some bases from which the world is controlled. In stating that patriarchal dominance is typical of the Venda culture, Kruger and Le Roux (2007:11) further explain how Venda women make use of *Ngano* song-stories to give voice to their position of subjugation, and in this way rebel against patriarchal domination. It could be argued that Jungian archetypes are, in part, extractions from such controlled environments, and that they can be identified in both texts chosen for this research. As such, a select few of the Jungian archetypes, as shared symbols (Herman, Jahn & Ryan 2005:26) were deemed pertinent to the discussion of *The Greedy Hippo* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Within the fantasy imagery of these two art works it is especially the Hero, as universal archetype (see Levitt 1972:136), who is emphasised, with the Trickster, the Shadow and to a much lesser extent the Child, Mentor, the Persona and Anima (Animus) who form part of the discussion. Although different cultures may have different interpretations of such character types (see Bal 1990:732), the universal appeal of the Hero, the Trickster, and other archetypes persist, particularly given the international or cross-cultural appeal of art works such as those chosen for this article.

Characters as archetypes in *The Greedy Hippo* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*

Whilst it would seem that both works of art deal with the clash of good against evil, it is understandable that this clash would be much more intricately portrayed in the Chinese film than in the *Ngano* song-story, simply because the film is a much more sophisticated work of art. Yet both art works depend on the basic premise that this struggle between good and evil finds its origins in religious belief, as explicated through mythology, where the characters represent these polarities between good and evil but within the parameters of different cultures.

In *The Greedy Hippo* there are three 'characters': the two orphan children, a brother (never mentioned by name), who becomes a (child) Hero through his intervention on behalf of the one person close to him, his sister Luthi (spelled Luti in the original *Ngano* song), as the victim. The Hippo on the other hand very soon identifies himself as the Trickster. Similar characterisation can be found in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, although it is important to point out that with this film we are dealing with a much more complicated mix of characters, a more elaborate narrative, and as logical consequence a more intricate text than *The Greedy Hippo*.

In *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* the primary cast of characters are (for the purposes of this discussion) limited to Master Li Mu Bai, also in his guise as the Hero and Mentor, Yu Shu Lien who is in fact a Mother-archetype, but also serves as Li's Anima, and Jen Yu. She is the most complex of the characters in this film, and is in a certain way the Child, the Shadow and sometimes a surrogate Animus, exhibiting both a light and a dark side to her character (Jaffé 1989:85; see also Gaarden 2005:24). Finally there is Lo, or Dark Cloud, who

becomes the Animus to Jen, and Jade Fox representing the Trickster. Paradoxically, the female figures in this film are all depicted as strong willed fighters belying a more traditional view of the female as the weaker sex (Cai 2005:442), who is depicted more typically in patriarchal fashion in *The Greedy Hippo*. Perhaps that is why they so easily slip into the role of the Animus (Walker 2002:52). It is, after all, a well-known fact that Jung regarded the Anima as of special significance amongst the archetypes as mediator between the conscious and the unconscious (Drake 1969:130).

Whilst *The Greedy Hippo* has as primary antagonist an animal, the hippopotamus, animals *per se* only play a peripheral role in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Paradoxically however, *Ngano* stories are often told in such a way that animal shapes imply the presence (as in the Anima or Persona) of a human being. According to Kruger and Le Roux (2007:7), men typically turn into marauding animals who hunt their human victims, such as the hippopotamus in the story of *The Greedy Hippo*, who is in actual fact symbolically the deceased mother's brother (Kruger & Le Roux 2007:146).

On the other hand, and whilst interpreted from a purely semiotic point of view, the essence of the Ang Lee film relies on the understanding of the esoteric symbolism hidden in the title of the movie; a crouching tiger, and a hidden dragon. Although, in this case, it implies the magical or fantasy-attributes of an animal as reflected in a human being. Throughout the film the viewer, especially within a particular cultural perspective (Bal 1990:585) has to presuppose certain mythical and magical powers as based on the embellished fantasy of these creatures. These inherent attributes are, for the tiger, connected to being one of the strongest animals in the Chinese zodiac (Fazzioli 1986:163–164; see also Wilson 1990:299), with bravery, competitiveness and unpredictability as characteristics. The dragon, on the other hand, is the only creature that is entirely fictional, exhibiting, according to the Chinese zodiac, character traits such as dominance and ambition. This, on the esoteric level, often leaves the dragon unfulfilled, because these traits come into conflict with its inherent benevolence, as harbinger of fertilising rain and symbol of good fortune (New Larousse Encyclopedia 1981:380). In this story the crouching tiger mirrors the persona of Jen, whilst the persona of Dark Cloud is represented by the hidden dragon, unfulfilled to the end.

Flying fantasies: *Greedy Hippo* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*

In both *The Greedy Hippo* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* the characters are able to move freely between the perceived 'real' worlds and a spiritual plane or esoteric dimension, which creates the juxtapositions of reality and fantasy (Vigilant Citizen 2010:2). In the words of Liu (2008:408) 'they know how to fly through the air'. This is mirrored in *The Greedy Hippo*, and although Van der Westhuizen, the animator, gives no clear indication just why the objects, and especially the little girl, are suddenly imbued with magical powers, in the final scenes they can and do fly through the

air. In terms of the audience's participation, referred to earlier (Martin & Jacobus 1978:57), it is imperative that the viewer or reader should suspend his or her disbelief, and become transported (Ryan 2001:93) or immersed in the reality of the fantasy, in effect seeing the work of art through the cultural lens of the country and landscape of origin. This immersion opens up the possibility that the film or animation could be used as metaphoric points of reference with the power to reveal psychic elements that, in the words of Dougherty (in Hauke and Alister 2001:195) '[have] the potential to expand and deepen one's subjective sense of self through fostering an ongoing relationship to the unconscious'.

In the story of *The Greedy Hippo* the brother is instrumental in saving his sister Luthi by releasing her from the bowels of the hippopotamus. The story is set against the backdrop of rural scenery simplified in the techniques of embroidery to form an undulating landscape with trees, huts, cattle, and the other well-known objects that occupy such a typical village scene. Each day the brother goes to the veld (bush) to tend the cattle and find food. Whilst he is gone the evil hippopotamus tries to trick Luthi to open the door to the hut. When eventually he (the Trickster) succeeds, he swallows not only Luthi but also a plate, some spoons and a pot. The brother arrives back at the hut, realises that foul play has been afoot, and chases after the hippo to find his sister, a Jungian damsel in distress. At this point the animator makes a conscious decision that in their liberation the hippo is not just sliced open in order for the objects and the girl to be removed, but when the brother (as Hero) pierces the hippo with his magical bow, the plate, the spoons, the pot, and the little girl all float out of the hippo. They are not taken out, or physically removed by the brother; they do not fall out, but they magically float through the air, divorced from the laws of gravity or the demands of artistic realism.

In order for the viewer to fully grasp the significance of these seemingly impossible actions that are taking place, we have to move into the realm of fantasy. According to Peyton (2011:1) many fantasy films contain a considerable amount of reality because they can portray human consciousness and an awareness of one's existence. This comes along with the benefit of depending on the esoteric qualities of the subconscious mind, culled from ancient myth, philosophy and religion (Sayers 2007:29) to reveal our emotions, innermost desires, and thoughts (see also Liu 2008:407–408 & Beebe 2001:78).

The story is about a legendary martial arts hero, Li Mu Bai, who has decided to give up a nomadic life of fighting by giving Green Destiny, his magical jade sword, to an old friend. Before he can do this, the sword is stolen. His unrequited yet dispassionate amorous pursuit of Shu Lien, whom he actually loves desperately (Beebe 2001:77), is complicated by the appearance on the scene of an unknown assassin. Whilst a large segment of the story concerns the identity of the assassin, a secondary tale of passionate love unfolds as the young girl Jen, and the rogue Lo, alias Dark Cloud, discover a mutual attraction. Jen eventually turns out to be the actual central figure of the tale, portraying many

facets of character, even to the extent of supplanting Li Mu Bai as the Hero (Stewart 2002:57–59). When the assassin is later identified as Jade Fox, who had previously killed Li's mentor, Li decides to dispose of Jade Fox for once and for all. The closing scenes of the film show their final battle, and the film ends with Jen's metaphysical return to the desert.

Throughout this film the major confrontations generally depict fights in which the combatants can float through the air, run on water, move through tree tops and bamboo forests as if on solid ground, perform wondrous feats of strength and appear invincible to the enemy, whilst exhibiting astonishing speed, dexterity of hand and mind, and control of all weapons (Beebe 2001:78) (See first fight sequence [courtyard scene], at 16 min 15s; second fight sequence [night on rooftops], at 43 min 07s.; third fight sequence [at the inn], at 1h 23 min 13s.)

This world of idealised fantasy, therefore, expects of the viewer to accept the esoteric nature of imaginative abilities and to enjoy the work of art as existing in some metaphysical sphere somewhere between reality and fiction.

Esoteric fantasy

As stated above, realism can be seen as an antithesis to the worlds of imaginative fantasy as described in the previous paragraph. It seems clear that in the wish to transcend physical reality, and to go above or beyond the bounds of rational explanation, artists may turn to the esoteric and the metaphysical to give credence to the inexplicable. According to Kellerman (1981:335) the term *esoteric* implies that which is only understood by an inner or select circle, or even that which is profound. Furthermore, when linked to Jungian archetypes as possible explanations for motives and actions, it is understandable that the message(s), embedded in the chosen works of art, or even the objects depicted within the works of art, should be found in diverse, multi-dimensional and sometimes even incongruent and duplicitous interpretations (Chan and Klein in Schamus 2004:44).

From this it follows that, in both *The Greedy Hippo* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, hidden or symbolic messages can be presented as meaningful in the way that the figures are understood, as moving images in conjunction with other elements such as household implements, weapons, animals, and ultimately the landscape itself. In *The Greedy Hippo* for example, household implements, such as the pot, could in itself be regarded as identification with the female, as is the direct reference to the importance of the mother who gave those items to Luthi. The bow, used to liberate Thuli, becomes symbolic of male dominance, just as Green Destiny, in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, represents a phallic symbol and Jen's hair comb a representation of feminine subservience.

This conjures up the possibilities of the clash between opposing forces, with the male identified as evil, and portrayed as the antagonist, as is the case with the hippopotamus. As a primary figure and the antagonist, he can also be correlated

with the Jungian Trickster, because he manages, by devious means, to swallow the household objects left by Luthi's mother, as well as Luthi herself. According to Kruger and Le Roux (2007:146) a story such as *The Greedy Hippo*, in which a monster (such as an animal) swallows people who are subsequently rescued by a boy hero, is often to be found in the African context. If one were to read some of these objects from a Freudian perspective, on which Jung subsequently embellishes (Bolen quoted by Giannini 2008:63), the pot could symbolise the womb, whilst the brother as Hero uses a magical bow, a possible phallic symbol, to release his sister. This release, interpreted as a rebirth, allows the sister to be newly initiated into the world of the living.

Such symbolic interpretations can be found in abundance in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, where Jen is both the Child and the Shadow, and essentially takes Li's place as the Hero (Stewart 2002:58). At one stage she even plays the role of the Trickster in emulation of her 'Master' (who just happens to be female, and carries as part of her identity the name of Fox, which is commonly regarded a pseudonym for the Trickster). Much of the first half of the film is devoted to Li's loss of the sword named Green Destiny. It is exactly this sword, and Jen's pursuit of it whilst vying to be a true warrior in what is ostensibly a man's world, that provides the clue to Jen's desire to be a man. It is well known that Wang Du Lu, the author of the books was greatly interested in psychoanalytic symbolism (Lee 2003:284). If the sword is meant to be read as symbolic of manhood (Chan 2004:46), then Li's actions in wanting it back, even cloaked under the guise of wanting to be Jen's teacher (Mentor), become obvious, a point of view shared by Schamus (2004:46) when he identifies Green Destiny as a phallic symbol. Perhaps the fact that Li Mu Bai is shown throughout as detached and even in denial (Greydanus 2004:2) could explain why Jen supplants him as Hero (Leung 2001:44). He eventually dies in a cavern, perhaps a symbolic return to the womb, whilst in the end Jen no longer seems to want to be with Lo (Dark Cloud), but seems to yearn instead to be united with that unmentioned something (Li) that she can only achieve by jumping into metaphysical oblivion.

Both *The Greedy Hippo* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* have stories that are intrinsically embedded in the landscapes of which they form part, and without which the stories would not only be the poorer, but lose the integrity of setting imperative to the deeper and often esoteric meanings within which the stories are enacted. Whilst the landscape of *The Greedy Hippo* comes from the Venda *Ngano* stories and a rural Vendaland, one must search further and deeper to find the possible origins of Chinese *Wu Xia*-stories.

Esoteric fantasy as found in Chinese poetry and landscape art

When the noted art theorist and historian Roger Fry (1935:4) once tried to pinpoint the essential difference between the art of East and West, he remarked: 'If I am right, we touch here on some profound difference in the creative methods and in the imaginative habits of European and Chinese artists'.

A poem by Li Bai entitled *Endless Yearning* is a good example of this perceived difference between European and Chinese attitudes, and illustrates how he uses nature as a referential framework. It is recognised as a poem filled with metaphysical allusions, and seen as one of his particularly esoteric poems descriptive of the elusive qualities of mountainous and cloudy landscapes (Liscomb 1999:363). The feeling of utter desolation and remoteness is emphasised by the poet's reference to the fact that this landscape is seemingly so isolated, and that time and (metaphysical) distance itself is so 'removed' that even the 'dreaming soul' cannot transcend these boundaries or limitations. Western art had by now established the primacy of realism, but this utterly esoteric reading of a landscape can also be found in most Chinese brush paintings.

By the fourth century A.D. texts by painters and theorists, regarding Chinese landscape painting, indicated that artists appreciated the almost magical potential of such paintings to re-create and organize the human experience of nature or to transport viewers to imaginary realms (Kleiner 2011:197). Throughout the aesthetic history of China, landscape painting played a much more important role than it did in the West, because Chinese artists believed that landscapes had a significance that moved far beyond the mere idea of using it as a setting or backdrop to human activities (see also Wang 1984, 70). To this purpose most Chinese landscape paintings have no desire to imitate reality (Kleiner 2011:197; Xiaoming 2002:i). They also believed that landscapes could evoke those lofty ideals, whereby a harmonious relationship with the order of the cosmos could literally tap into nature's potential to transform the human spirit (Chen 1988:34).

The landscapes in *The Greedy Hippo* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*

The landscape in *The Greedy Hippo* is the typical African environment of a traditional kraal around which huts, fences and domestic animals are seen. Surrounding this are trees, flowers and undulating hills, the rural setting and primitive lifestyle, enhanced by the rough textures and unfettered execution of the embroidery. Typical in a far more different way, and also with much more diversity, are the landscapes of China that form the backdrop to *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. These include the western deserts of Shaanxi province and Yanan, the chalk cliffs associated with the Guilin area, and the bamboo forests and glades with evergreen trees of Anji (Klein 2004:19; Tomasevic 1980:194).

In the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* the viewer is confronted very often with 'airy visuals' (Ascarte 2008:72) that challenge accepted conventions of realism. It is particularly the Western viewer who has difficulty reconciling the overtly realistic *mise-en-scène* that characterises a large part of the film with the fantasy scenes interspersed at regular intervals (Lee 2003:291). Viewers who are well versed in the esoteric aspects of Chinese art have no trouble in either understanding or appreciating the metaphysical attributes embedded in the

film, but many (Western) viewers who anticipated seeing and experiencing realism, came away bemused or even alienated (Liu 2008:400–401), particularly when, quite early in the film, one of the characters is seen to run through the air. (See first fight sequence [courtyard scene], at 16 min 15s).

This emphasises the need for disparate readings to find common ground in interdisciplinary research, and to come to an understanding of the value contained in such a cross cultural reading of art works. It further underlines the possibilities of an integrated approach to cross cultural studies (Elfenbein & Ambady 2003:160) to contextualise not only the inherent changeability of a culture (Bal 2002:226), but to use such works of art in order to enhance understanding and communication between disparate cultures and encourage greater cultural awareness (Herman, Jahn & Ryan 2005:496). The scene from *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* described above, as well as those to follow, must be read with an esoteric understanding of Chinese *Wu Xia* film techniques. This finds resonance in *The Greedy Hippo* when there too the spoon, pot and eventually the girl can fly through the air.

There are at least ten scenes in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* where both heroes and villains fly, twirl or run through the air. A few scenes take place within architectural spaces, but most capitalise on the natural scenery of China. These settings lend themselves to movements that are choreographed from treetop to treetop, that take place on water, or that occur on swaying bamboo (see fight scene in bamboo forest, at 1h 35 min 07s).

The magical effect of stylised actions, as seen in the graceful movement and inner feelings (Chung 2007:417), of the combatants are reminiscent of a similar, although much more primitive, stylisation that can be seen in *The Greedy Hippo*.

In this story the turning orb of the sun, the stylised walk of the boy and the animals, the picking of fruit and even the fire in the hearth show an element of staccato-like kinetic movement. These could be read as naively suited to portray the menial actions associated with a rural African village. Even the rambling gait of the hippopotamus with his twirling tail belies the evil intentions of this creature. The fire in the hearth and, after the hippopotamus swallows the girl, the twinkling stars, must all be read with the uncluttered naiveté of a child, thus, accentuating the innocence of the orphans as opposed to the evil of the hippopotamus. When the brother returns, and with his magic bow liberates the axes of the father, the spoons and clay pot of the mother, and especially his little sister, they fly through the air in much the same way as the *Wu Xia* style heroes did.

The final leap

Just as *The Greedy Hippo* is an allegorical tale embedded in the folklore of the Venda, the interpretation of which can be implemented on many and even simultaneous levels, so too *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is a complex story



Source: Permission to use this image was obtained from the North-West University, South Africa.

FIGURE 1: Luthi being freed from the bowels of the hippo by her brother with his magic bow.

that encapsulates social, psychological and even religious symbolism, the interpretation of which presents many layers that are best served by understanding the mystical and esoteric symbols therein. Both works of art feature a Hero and a Trickster. Although the villains are different in gender, they show powers of transformation in service of the pursuit of their evil deeds. As viewers we have to understand and accept the esoteric symbolism embedded in these characters, not only with regard to the way in which humans can fly through the air, use magical powers to vanquish the enemy or fulfil their destinies as heroes, but also in terms of the settings or backdrops. We must perceive the landscape and the rough textures of the Tambani embroidery, in the portrayal of undulating hills and placid streams, as complementary to the schematic rendition in the animation of *The Greedy Hippo*. In a similar vein we should appreciate the bamboo forests, the whispering glades and mountain tops interspersed with rivulets of mist in order to understand an esoteric aspect of the overriding theme, which is the way in which the landscape reflects inner nature.

In both stories there are figures who are hunted or persecuted, such as the sister in *The Greedy Hippo* (and eventually the Hippo himself), whilst in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* Jen, regardless of also inheriting the position of Hero (Stewart 2002:58), becomes the one who is persecuted even whilst her 'master' (Jade Fox, in actual fact a woman) is both hunter and hunted. Li Mu Bai, the initial Hero in the film, falls prey to Jade Fox's scheming, eventually forfeiting his life, whilst Jen, instrumental in causing the turn of events not only the result of the theft of the Green Destiny, is the only one who, like the sister in *The Greedy Hippo*, achieves a final redemption (Pham 2004:130). According to Kruger and Le Roux (2007:7) even the helpless characters are not denied this redemption, but find refuge within the community of the vulnerable, whilst their physical frailty belies a spirit of rebellion that enables them to escape and even undermine those who abuse them (Stewart, 2002:65). In this regard both

Luthi and Jen escape the manipulations of the Hippo and Jade Fox respectively. Both primary antagonists die, although the consequences for Luthi and Jen are very different.

The role of fantasy is therefore brought to a logical climax and conclusion in both stories. In the final scene of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, Jen gives wing to Lo's story, related to her when they first acknowledged their love for each other. Lo says: 'A faithful heart makes wishes come true.' Jen tells Lo to make a wish. He closes his eyes and says: 'To be back in the desert, together again.' Jen smiles, turns, and leaps into the clouds. They seem to catch her gently, before she disappears into the void (Lee 2003). (see the final leap, at 1h 54 min 06s.)

And so eventually even Jen achieves exactly what Kruger and Le Roux (2007:7) refer to when they say, with reference to the *Ngano* characters, that they are not denied redemption. It can be argued that in both cases the leap through the void of space completes a spiritual transformation (Vigilant Citizen 2010:6) which leads to a heightened sense of consciousness to allow the dreamer to make the fantasy concrete, bringing the stories to an esoteric although logical conclusion through the rebirth of the central characters, which is the final redemption.

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