

Arts & Letters

FILM

[Hero]

Middle Kingdom Masterpiece

By Steve Sailer

THROUGH THE END OF the summer blockbuster season, only one film all year had possessed the artistic heft to stand out from the lackluster pack. Leaving aside all the baggage that everyone brought to it, and evaluating it just as a work of filmmaking, by far the outstanding achievement of the first seven months of 2004 was 'The Passion of the Christ.' As Quentin Tarantino told the *LA Weekly*: "I think ['The Passion'] actually is one of the most brilliant visual storytelling movies I've seen since the talkies."

Yet now, at the stub-end of the summer, when studios normally shoot their wounded, comes a film that can stand aesthetically alongside "The Passion": the Chinese epic "Hero."

When Taiwanese prestige-drama director Ang Lee hit the box-office jackpot with his classy kung-fu flick "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," it opened the door for mainland Chinese director Zhang Yimou, maker of the 1991 cinephile favorite "Raise the Red Lantern," to finance a jaw-dropping chop-socky/art film/pro-Communist Party epic featuring some of the most extraordinary art direction in the history of movies.

Stanley Kubrick used to lament that he couldn't afford to spend as much per minute turbo-charging the visual impact of his films as TV commercial directors do, but every single shot in "Hero" looks

like the most expensive tableau in a Christmas-season perfume ad. "Hero" combines the overpowering colors of Akira Kurosawa's "Ran" with the eye for exquisite detail of Carroll Ballard's "The Black Stallion" into a stately yet delirious surfeit of beauty. If "Hero" only cost the claimed \$31 million to make, the Chinese yuan definitely *is* undervalued. Zhang, whose earlier movies were often censored, now has the full support of the Party, as his scenario shows.

"Hero" is vaguely based on a celebrated assassination attempt on the ruthless King of Qin. He ruled the most aggressive of the seven Warring States in the third century BC. Subsequent imperial historians have tended to demonize this pre-unification era as anarchic, thus justifying the emperor's monopoly on power. In truth, competition between the Warring States made this the most innovative era in Chinese history, just as European culture flourished during the centuries of state competition follow-

highest character. More untrustworthy Rashomon-style color-coded flashbacks follow until we learn that the guest is a fourth assassin. Will the hitman get his revenge on the aggressor, or will he sheath his sword to spare the life of the only man brutal enough to unify "Our Land" (or as, other translations more ominously put it, "All Under Heaven")?

The suspense might be tauter if you don't already know that the King of Qin survived to become one of the most important figures in world history. In 221 BC, he completed his conquest of the other Warring States and declared himself Qin Shi Huangdi, the "First Emperor of China." Somewhere between Napoleon and Stalin on the Evil Tyrant Meter, he imposed the relatively efficient but ultimately stultifying template of centralism that has held China back ever since. Fortunately, the disunity of the Chinese during the 1970s allowed Deng glimpses from Mao's mainland of madness of what Chinese people were

HE IMPOSED THE EFFICIENT BUT STULTIFYING TEMPLATE OF CENTRALISM.

ing the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, while it now is losing momentum under the orderly but uninspiring European Union. How many years has it been, for instance, since a European movie could compare to "Hero" in artistic ambition?

In "Hero," the normally wary King of Qin suffers an unknown swordsman (played by martial arts whiz Jet Li) to approach within an unheard of ten paces of his throne to tell of how he killed the three famous assassins sent by the enemy state of Zhao. The visitor explains in a red-saturated flashback that he exploited the assassins' moral flaws, but the king is suddenly dubious, saying his enemies were warriors of the

accomplishing in Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong under sane government.

The film's Chinese-unity-*über-alles* philosophy should seem ominous to the Taiwanese. Still, there's little question that Zhang, the one-time bad boy, has tapped into an authentic current of mounting Chinese national pride that has re-energized his art. In his drive to re-imagine the founding myth of this emerging industrial and potential military superpower, Zhang's movie might even bear comparison to the great nationalist operas of the 19th century: "Hero" as visual Wagner. ■

Rated PG-13 for stylized martial-arts violence and a scene of sensuality

BOOKS

[*The Plot Against America*,
Philip Roth, Houghton Mifflin,
400 pages]

Heil to the Chief

By Bill Kauffman

PHILIP ROTH'S *The Plot Against America* is the novel that a neoconservative would write, if a neoconservative could write a novel.

In 1940, as in 2004, voters faced a choiceless presidential election between pro-war interventionists, with a noble antiwar socialist (Norman Thomas then, Ralph Nader now) the best man in the field.

In Roth's what-if world, we the people have an actual choice in 1940. Instead of a third term for President Franklin D. Roosevelt, America Firster Charles Lindbergh is elected president, whereupon all hell breaks loose—which is to say America is at peace, a condition never again to be permitted, apparently, in the United States of Armaments. The horrific consequences of electing an antiwar Midwesterner are seen through the eyes of young Philip Roth, son of an insurance agent, and his Jewish family in Newark, New Jersey.

In our world, Wall Street operatives steered the 1940 GOP nomination to the hawkish utilities executive Wendell Willkie, as Gore Vidal describes with wit, artistry, and panache in *The Golden Age* (2000). That novel also pivots on the 1940 election, although Vidal regards Lindbergh as “the true white knight through and through,” and “the best that we are ever apt to produce in the hero line, American style.”

Vidal is a proprietary patriot, utterly comfortable with our history because it is his history. Roth is ill at ease in the American past; his research seems to

have consisted of a quick flip through the courtier histories of James MacGregor Burns and Arthur Schlesinger. He bristles with contempt for the benighted denizens of “the working-class heartland of isolationist America”—that is, mothers and fathers who would rather not send their boys to die in foreign wars. Their parochial and pacific instincts point the way to a Middle American fascism.

Roth writes in sodden clichés: for instance, FDR “inspired millions of ordinary families like ours to remain hopeful in the midst of hardship.” This is Time-Life prose. There is not a felicitous sentence in this book; nor is there a spark of wit or a single subversive thought. The literary critics of the Department of Homeland Security will pronounce it fit for best-sellerdom.

Charles A. Lindbergh was a classic product of Upper Midwest populism. His congressman father, a fierce foe of U.S. involvement in World War I, was dubbed the “Gopher Bolshevik” by the *New York Times*. Lindbergh is easily understood in a Minnesota tradition that stretches from the Gopher Bolshevik and Sen. Henrik Shipstead through Bob Dylan and Eugene McCarthy. He was no more a Nazi than FDR was.

But not since the Spanish-American War have honorable Americans been permitted to criticize a war without being slandered as traitorous lackeys for the enemy. Just as Eugene V. Debs was

The Plot Against America is the sort of novel a bootlicking author might write to curry favor with a totalitarian government. The author puts a fictive gloss over the officially sanctioned history. Thank God things happened as they did! The alternative to the regime was madness, chaos, murder. Dissenters must be demonized, so Roth saddles his America First villains with positions exactly opposite those they actually took.

The America First Committee was the largest (800,000 members) antiwar organization in U.S. history. Its members ranged from patricians to populists, from Main Street Republicans to prairie socialists. John F. Kennedy was a donor; his future brother-in-law Sargent Shriver was a founder, as were Gerald Ford, Potter Stewart, and Kingman Brewster. Many of the finest writers in America sympathized with (or joined) America First—Sinclair Lewis, Edmund Wilson, Robinson Jeffers, e.e. cummings, and William Saroyan—while the leading pro-war authors were such toadies as Archibald MacLeish (or macarchibald maclapdog macleish, as cummings called him). Aviator Lindbergh was the AFC's most popular speaker, though he never formally joined the committee.

The antiwar movement of 1940-41 was essentially libertarian: in favor of peace and civil liberties, opposed to conscription. Rather than accept this complexity, Roth opts for inversion: his iso-

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calumniated as a Kaiser-lover and Martin Luther King Jr. as a communist, so must Charles Lindbergh be a crypto-Nazi. Given the current climate, Roth's book is especially odious. Or perhaps *The Plot Against America* is meant to serve as the writing sample in Roth's application for a speechwriter job in the Bush administration.

lutionists are the party of repression and conscription, while his warhawks are the party of liberty. War is Peace. Freedom is Slavery.

And so Montana Senator Burton K. Wheeler, running mate of “Fighting Bob” La Follette on the 1924 Progressive Party ticket and an early supporter of the New Deal who went into opposition