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## This Time He Moves! The Deeper Significance of Hou Hsiao-Hsien's Radical Break in Good Men, Good Women

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# This Time He Moves! The Deeper Significance of Hou Hsiao-Hsien's Radical Break in *Good Men, Good Women*

## **Abstract**

Following the recent success of Taiwanese film directors, such as Hou Hsiao-hsien, Edward Yang, Ang Lee and Tsai Ming-liang, Taiwanese film is raising its profile in contemporary cinema. This collection presents an exciting and ambitious foray into the cultural politics of contemporary Taiwan film that goes beyond the auteurist mode, the nation-state argument and vestiges of the New Cinema.

*Cinema Taiwan* considers the complex problems of popularity, conflicts between transnational capital and local practice, non-fiction and independent filmmaking as emerging modes of address, and new possibilities of forging vibrant film cultures embedded in national (identity) politics, gender/sexuality and community activism. Insightful and challenging, the essays in this collection will attract attention to a globally significant field of cultural production and will appeal to readers from the areas of film studies, cultural studies and Chinese culture and society.

## **Keywords**

Taiwanese film directors, Taiwanese cinema, Hou Hsiao-hsien

## **Disciplines**

Asian Studies | Chinese Studies | Film and Media Studies

## 13 “This Time He Moves!”

The deeper significance of Hou Hsiao-hsien’s radical break in *Good Men, Good Women*

*James Udden*

Given the complexity of his films and his situation, there are seemingly endless avenues for inquiry into the significance of Hou Hsiao-hsien. Yet what seems particularly, if not peculiarly, interesting about Hou is that his style matters in more ways than one might imagine, touching on issues that lie outside the usual provenance of cinematic esthetics. This becomes especially clear when his style changes, and when it does not change “back.”

Take, for example, Hou Hsiao-hsien’s *Café Lumière* (2004), which has been advertised as a homage to Yasujiro Ozu. But what sort of homage? In the later stage of his career, Ozu made entire films where the camera does not move even for the slightest reframing, preferring instead to edit on a 360° system with precise compositions and sometimes graphic matching from shot to shot. For Hou, a stylistic homage to Ozu poses a dilemma. Hou has never edited like Ozu, and in his recent films, he uses a mobile camera in the majority of his shots. Still, this particular film, produced by Shochiku no less, provided a chance for Hou to return to an earlier incarnation of himself: after all, up to 1993, Hou frequently used a mostly static camera in his long takes, the one stylistic trait he did share with the later Ozu. Yet Hou does nothing of the sort in *Café Lumière*. More than three-quarters of the shots in this film contain camera movements, and the majority of these go beyond slight reframings.<sup>1</sup> Homage or not, this was still a film by Hou Hsiao-hsien, and more importantly, a post-1995 Hou film. Consciously or not, Hou distances himself from both Ozu and an earlier version of himself.

This recent example confirms how Hou’s 1995 work, *Good Men, Good Women*, remains the most radical break of his career. Long the master of the stationary camera up till then, suddenly in this film Hou’s camera seems unable to keep still. Many back then noticed this striking shift in style, but few knew what to make of it. Some simply asked why, but the answers proved to be elusive. Most fascinating, however, is how some were seemingly disturbed by the deeper implications of this change, which has persisted ever since, even in *Café Lumière*.

Yet why does this striking change in style even matter? It seems odd to suggest that a mobile camera is something more than a mobile camera, that such a formal phenomenon could be portentous and disturbing. In this case, however, this is not merely a pedantic question of form; rather it raises issues that extend beyond esthetic parameters, even touching on questions of national identity. For this

reason we need to explore the nature of this change in some detail. More importantly, however, we also need to sort out why the now oft-moving camera in *Good Men, Good Women* is such a significant shift, and why it was not entirely welcomed. As it turns out, this is not simply a departure from a stylistic signature for one of the most original directors in the world today. It is also a departure from a living legacy Hou has inadvertently left for other Asian filmmakers. And while this may have simply been Hou rubbing up against the limits of the medium itself, his own allowance of this radical break should come as no surprise. After all, Hou Hsiao-hsien is a Taiwanese director.

### **A ringing rupture**

For those familiar with Hou's films, the opening shot of *Good Men, Good Women* must seem like the Hou they have always known. As it turns out, however, this opening is a prolonged mirage. A slow fade in reveals a hazy landscape and an extreme long shot of a group of people singing in the distance (Figure 13.1). This shot lasts a total of 85 seconds, being almost exactly the average shot length of Hou's previous film, *The Puppetmaster* (1993). The camera never moves, not even slightly, for the duration of this long take. A careful observer may note slight differences from his past films, such as how one can barely make out the mountains in the background, unlike the breathtaking landscapes of his previous works. One might also note that this scene is rendered in soft black and white which almost resembles a daguerreotype. Still, all of these seem to be minor modulations in the usual Hou game. The shot fades to black as the sound of the singing continues over the film's title, before



*Figure 13.1* The opening shot of *Good Men, Good Women*.

gradually fading out as well. A false reassurance washes over from this pre-title sequence handled in a single take: this is the Hou we have come to know.

Right at the cut to the second scene, however, a ringing phone chimes in: lacking an extended sound bridge to smooth over this sudden rupture, one is almost jarred into this brave new cinematic world unlike any previously created by Hou. The camera lingers briefly on a white window from a low angle (Figure 13.2), but soon it tilts down and pans left very slowly, revealing the details of an apartment before it frames the prostrate Liang Ching on her bed (Figure 13.3). After focusing on her, the camera becomes motivated by her movements as she languidly wakes up. It reframes her carefully before panning right as she approaches the refrigerator. It then pans left until she seats herself at the table, drinking water from a bottle (Figure 13.4). Soon the camera leaves her there, panning right and tracking in very slowly onto the image of a television screen showing a scene from Ozu's *Late Spring* (Figure 13.5). Liang Ching approaches the television set as the camera tilts up to show her tearing off a fax from her fax machine (Figure 13.6). The camera remains still as she reads, while a voice-over recites excerpts from her stolen diary. Once she moves toward the bathroom, the camera follows her in a pan left and holds the view of her moving behind thick, ochre bricks made of semi-opaque glass (Figure 13.7). She sings a mournful ballad to close the scene.

This *plan sequence* is nearly four minutes long, a not surprising figure for Hou Hsiao-hsien. Yet it feels radically different from any previous long take by him. It certainly represents the most elaborate use of camera movements in any Hou shot up to that time, even more so than the numerous movements to be found in his early work, *The Boys from Fengkuei* (1984). More importantly, this long yet moving take is hardly a one-off device in this film: it instead establishes a major stylistic



Figure 13.2 Opening of the second shot of *Good Men, Good Women*.



*Figure 13.3* Same shot, now of Liang Ching on bed.



*Figure 13.4* Same shot, now of her drinking water at the table.



Figure 13.5 Same shot, camera drifts away to reveal an old Ozu film on TV.



Figure 13.6 Same shot, title up to frame her tearing off and reading a fax.

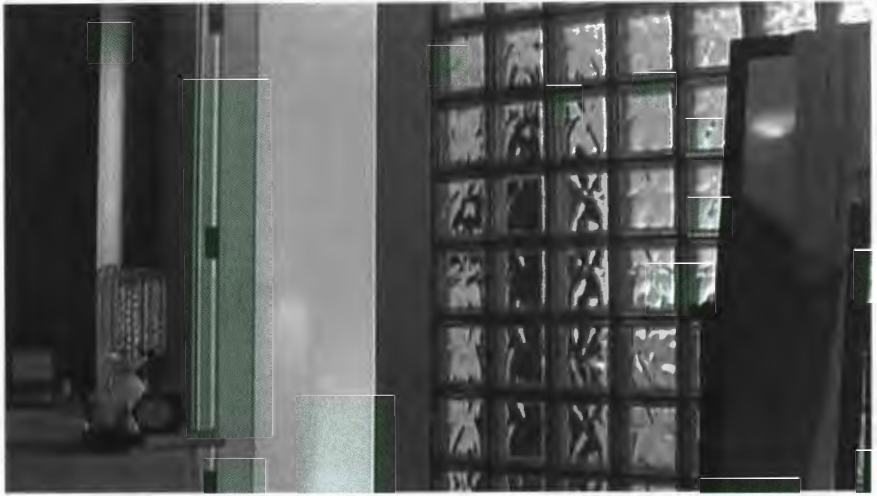


Figure 13.7 End of same shot with Liang Ching in the bathroom.

pattern for the entire work. Even in those moments where the old Hou seems to return, the new Hou still breaks through in subtle ways, almost as if there is an underlying tension between them. For example, during a four minute take of the star-crossed lovers talking in front of the mirror, the actors themselves never move. (Indeed, Jack Kao barely moves his head.) Nevertheless, the camera for long stretches continuously pans left and tracks backward at an excruciatingly slow pace, slowly making him more prominent in the frame as well (Figures 13.8 and 13.9). Even Hou's nearly static shots now move.

### **“This Time He Moves!”**

What is particularly interesting is that Hou's inner circle not only first called attention to this radical change, they also found it significant, if not troubling. “This Time He Moves!” was originally the title of an article by the film's scriptwriter, Zhu Tianwen, written upon the release of *Good Men, Good Women*. For Zhu, the moving camera became the most salient symbol of a new Hou in the making. Indeed, her words then were to prove prophetic: “In the future when people study the films of Hou Hsiao-hsien, they will discover that in his creative development *The Puppetmaster* is a pinnacle, and thereafter there will be complications and twists and turns.”<sup>2</sup> She goes on to recount how unsettling the change was for some of those who knew Hou best. For example, after screening *Good Men, Good Women*, longtime Hou collaborator, Zhan Hongzhi, was stupefied by what he had just seen. As Zhu Tianwen describes it, it was as if Zhan was saying goodbye to an old friend he had once known so well.<sup>3</sup> Even Hou himself has more than once expressed his displeasure with this film, often calling it his least favorite.<sup>4</sup>





*Figure 13.8* Early on in long take in front of mirror.



*Figure 13.9* Same long take after a very slow pan left and track back.

Yet while Hou and company are quite aware of the change itself, they are not as clear as to why it occurred. On occasion Hou has claimed that the actress, Annie Shizuko Inoh, posed new challenges since he needed to find ways to express her various states of consciousness. This new requirement, coupled with the need to tie together the various story lines in different time frames, somehow caused Hou to discuss moving the camera even during the scripting stage.<sup>5</sup> At other times, however, Hou has expressed the belief that the stationary camera has always been the best way to capture the feeling of the past. He says he first learned this lesson from watching Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* where he felt the moving camera was so much at odds with the historical subject matter. Thus, according to him, since he had lost interest in the past with *Good Men, Good Women* (at least in part), he had also lost interest in the stationary camera.<sup>6</sup> Chen Huaïen, the cinematographer for *Good Men, Good Women*, further complicates the issue. Chen attributes this striking change to the fact that he was no longer operating his own camera. The new camera operator, Han Yunzhong, was unsteady at times, according to him, thus leading to the decision that this unsteadiness would be better exploited than eradicated.<sup>7</sup>

It is hard to know what to make of all these statements taken together. The evidence from Hou's own films, for example, does not corroborate this association of the static camera with the historical past. In *Good Men, Good Women*, a good part of the film does occur in the past, even if it is supposedly a vision of the past from a character in the present. While the camera does move less in these sections compared to the other two narrative strands, the majority of shots still contain ample camera movements. Likewise, *Flowers of Shanghai* is set entirely in the historical past and yet there is only one shot in the entire film – a brief detail shot of a hairpin on a table – where the camera does not move at all. Furthermore, this would not explain *Daughter of the Nile*, the 1987 film set entirely in the present. Despite its contemporary subject matter, almost 90 percent of the shots in the film have no camera movement, making it the most static of all of Hou's films.

Such inconsistent explanations imply that the moving camera in *Good Men, Good Women* was not a fully conscious decision on Hou's part. By contrast, he seems clearer as to what attracted him to the static camera years earlier.<sup>8</sup> Yet both Hou's discovery of the stationary camera, and his later abandonment of it, are the result of a director who has relied, not on abstract principles, shooting scripts, nor storyboards, but on intuition spurred by the experience of the moment in a particular environment. In other words, the moving camera in this film may have snuck up on him almost unawares, and yet for some reason he felt he had to continue on that path ever since.

Yet why should we concern ourselves with a formal detail where a director who usually did not move a film camera, now seems to do so incessantly? The answer is that there is more at stake here than mere formalism. This issue is significant on three levels. First, it touches on Hou's own personal identity as a filmmaker, and at first glance seems to work against an identity he had long cultivated up to 1993. Second, and more importantly, Hou's identity as a filmmaker is not strictly his own, but has profound, extra-personal implications. This is most evident in how

Hou's signature style has been taken up by several other Asian directors who have followed his cue and have created an Asian brand of cinematic minimalism. Finally, and most significantly, this change serves as a reminder that Hou is a director from Taiwan, and not elsewhere. Far from mitigating his identity as a Taiwanese director, this sudden change by Hou is indicative of how Taiwanese he truly is. In fact, given that he learned and practices his craft in Taiwan, such a sudden change should come as no surprise at all.

It is time to deal with each of these issues in more detail.

### **Partial death of a signature style**

Knowingly or not, Hou took a tremendous risk when he started moving the camera in *Good Men, Good Women*. In doing so, he started veering away from one of the two most recognized pillars of his own signature style: the stationary camera. To this day Hou has remained committed to the other pillar, the long take, and presumably will continue to do so for as long as he makes films. Yet simply calling Hou a "master of the long take" does not fully explain how he has stood out on the world stage. After all, he does have some distinguished company in this regards, not just with the likes of Kenji Mizoguchi, Michelangelo Antonioni, Miklos Jancso and Theo Angelopoulos, but even with other directors in Taiwan such as Edward Yang, Zhang Yi and, more recently, Xu Xiaoming and Tsai Ming-liang. Thus, it is not simply his having long takes, but what Hou does with those long takes that matters the most.

I am already treading on familiar territory here since in a previous article I have argued that Hou's style up to 1993 featured both long takes "and" a predominantly static camera, something which does not mesh with existing definitions of what a Chinese film style should be.<sup>9</sup> But I now want to emphasize another point I had suggested there: not only does this tendency not quite fit definitions of a Chinese style, it even does not correspond with the norms of a long-take director found anywhere over the last 80 years. The figures provided in Appendix A demonstrate that as his career progresses, Hou's takes not only get longer on average, they also become increasingly static – a very odd development indeed. For this reason, Hou has been called not just the master of the long take, he has also been rightly called the "master of the stationary camera."<sup>10</sup> Not that he is completely alone even here: one might recall others such as Chantal Akerman, or even Andy Warhol. But unlike these notable figures, Hou used this rarified esthetic strategy to achieve neither a strong sense of alienation, nor an "esthetic of boredom," but instead a highly understated, muted form of cinematic lyricism. That this is even possible with both long takes and a static camera is a remarkable accomplishment, and this is where Hou truly stands alone.

All this changes starting 1995, as seen in Appendix B. Hou's continued commitment to the long take suddenly seems to come at the expense of the stationary camera. Unlike the films up to 1993, which stand out like a sore thumb with such a high percentage of static long takes, from 1995 on, the high percentage of shots with a mobile camera blend in well with the figures from other films by Mizoguchi,

Jancso, and Angelopoulos included in the list, where anywhere from 60 to 90 percent of the shots contain at least some camera movement. In other words, by this measure at least, Hou has actually become "less" distinctive, not more so.

If one looks more carefully at Hou's entire oeuvre, however, one begins to realize that both the long take and the stationary and/or mobile camera were not ends in themselves, but means to other esthetic ends much more complex than commonly recognized. Hou Hsiao-hsien, as it turns out, is the master of many things besides the long take and the stationary camera; above all else, Hou is the master of highly elliptical narrative structures conjoined with an audaciously dense *mise-en-scène*. The former are organized in such an unusual fashion that often significant narrative details are prodigiously delayed in their exposition, or handled in such an indirect fashion that they test viewer comprehensibility. The latter ensures that many of those key narrative details are placed at the very margins of visibility, often lost in a fecund weaving of the quotidian enmeshed in slivers of light and shadow. David Bordwell has noted that the static long take works well with other strategies such as the "postponement of scene-by-scene exposition" and what Peggy Chiao Hsiung-p'ing has called a "recapitulative strategy."<sup>11</sup> Taking this larger view, the static camera alone is not the core of Hou Hsiao-hsien's cinematic being.

Yet it may well be that Hou faced the limits of the static long take by the time he was making *Good Men, Good Women*. In this film, Hou pushes variegated lighting schemes, extreme *chiaroscuro*, and oblique staging strategies even further than he had in his previous two works. Had he persisted with the static long take, he might have eventually accomplished an esthetic of boredom à la Warhol, or the alienation of a Belgian housewife à la Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du commerce, 1080 Brussels* (1975). What would have been lost was that patented indirect expression of poetic feeling that has been the hallmark of Hou's entire career. Thus, *Good Men, Good Women* is less a radical break than a part of a larger palimpsest where a single item – i.e. the static camera – is erased to make more room for other ongoing esthetic developments.

Yet that is precisely where the risk lies. *Mise-en-scène* in general, and lighting and staging in particular, do not lend themselves to blunt measurements.<sup>12</sup> Instead they are subtle, elusive, yet pervasive qualities; to get at them requires painstaking work and case-by-case analyses, which in Hou's case has only recently been accomplished by David Bordwell in his *Figures Traced in Light*.<sup>13</sup> Being called the "master of the long take" or the "master of the stationary camera" is somehow more graspable and verifiable, even measurable, something the two appendixes attest to. In losing one of these monikers in 1995, Hou unwittingly removed one of the more concrete angles by which the significance of his work could be apprehended. That he has had no major festival awards since *The Puppetmaster* in 1993 suggests that this change has had more impact than even Hou would probably care to admit.

## Hou's legacy: pan-East Asian minimalism

As it turns out, however, Hou Hsiao-hsien is not an island, but has become the center of a transnational movement that extends well beyond his own work. This can be best described as a pan-East Asian brand of minimalism, evidence of which appears at major film festivals almost every year now, almost to the point of becoming a cliché. Once again, this trend over the last decade is largely defined by a group of films which possess the same traits we find in Hou Hsiao-hsien's work up to 1993: a long-take strategy coupled with a mostly stationary camera.

There is no institutional center to this "movement," no *Cahiers du cinema* around which young filmmakers and ideas coalesce, no manifestos to live or protest by, no "dogmas" by which to promote an alternative brand of filmmaking. Instead this trend seems to have grown organically, beginning on a small island of dubious geopolitical status. At the forefront of this distinctive brand of Taiwanese filmmaking is Hou Hsiao-hsien. Hou forged a distinguishing identity for Taiwanese cinema, not through press conferences or proclamations, but through the films themselves. Moreover, the most salient traits of that identity got him notice among his peers both within Taiwan and without. In other words, a single filmmaker pushed to the limits a most unusual stylistic strategy that did not seem to have any contemporary counterparts in the West. And that is precisely why it has proved to be so attractive to other Asian directors.

After Hou's stunning success with *A City of Sadness* in 1989, the imitative trend takes off in Taiwan as several directors there all become more Hou-like, including Edward Yang. Yang had long been considered the "Western" or "modernist" wing of the Taiwan New Cinema, the putative inverse of Hou, who was the "Eastern" or "traditional" wing. In the 1990s, however, even Edward Yang becomes more Hou-like. The average shot lengths of Yang's notable urban trilogy in the 1980s (*That Day, On the Beach* (1983), *Taipei Story* (1985), and *The Terrorizers* (1986)) never exceeded 15 seconds per shot in any of those films. For Yang's films in the 1990s, by contrast, his takes are averaging anywhere from just over 25 seconds to just under 50 seconds per shot for his four films from that decade (*A Brighter Summer Day* (1991), *Confucian Confusion* (1994), *Mahjong* (1996), and *Yìyì* (2000)). But it does not stop with the long take: Yang at times also attempted more challenging methods of arranging his mise-en-scene, something most evident in *A Brighter Summer Day*. Most interestingly, however, Yang has persisted in the vein of the pre-1995 Hou when it comes to camera movements: his longer takes in the 1990s are still relatively static compared to the norm for a long-take director, evidence that even he could not resist the lure of Hou's earlier understated style. In *A Brighter Summer Day*, for example, only 39 percent of the shots contain any camera movements despite an average shot length of around 27 seconds per shot. *Yìyì* has an even longer ASL of around 30 seconds per shot, and yet only one-third of those have any camera movements whatsoever.

Hou's legacy slowly becomes evident with younger directors in Taiwan as well. *Dust of Angels* (1991), directed by the newcomer, Xu Xiaoming, and produced by Hou himself, displays such a marked long-take style that many conjectured Hou

was its behind-the-scenes director as well.<sup>14</sup> The ASL in this film is even slightly longer than the figure for *A City of Sadness*, but this film hardly matches Hou's masterpiece in terms of narrative and visual complexity. Moreover, the percentage of shots with camera movements in *Dust of Angels* is nearly 60 percent, almost twice the figure for *City*. As the decade progresses, however, many of these young directors seem to have an increasing number of "static" long takes. A mild example is Chang Tso-chi, who had worked under Hou in *A City of Sadness*. In Chang's *Darkness and Light* (1999), his takes last nearly 26 seconds on average, but the camera moves in little over 35 percent of these shots.

By the mid-1990s, however, there were indications that this was no longer strictly a Hou or a Taiwanese style. Adherents to the static long-take strategy can now be found in Japan, Korea, and most recently, Mainland China. The first clear evidence for this is in 1995 with *Maborosi*, by the Japanese director, Hirokazu Kore-eda. In this film the average shot lasts 25 seconds, and yet only about six percent of them have any camera movement at all. (Kore-eda paid the price for this, in a sense, since critics in his own country accused him of being too much like Hou.)<sup>15</sup> A more extreme example is Lee Kwang-mo's *Springtime in My Hometown* (1999) from South Korea. In that film the average shot lasts nearly 50 seconds, yet by my count only two percent of the shots have any camera movement. Now there are even Mainland Chinese examples of this Hou-inspired style, the most notable being Jia Zhangke's *Platform* and Wang Chao's *The Orphan of Anyang*, both from 2001.

The two most consistent practitioners of this style, however, are the Malaysian-born Tsai Ming-liang in Taiwan, and the Korean director, Hong Sang-soo. Interestingly, the trajectory of Tsai's career to date is similar to that of Hou's, since like Hou, the average shot lengths seem to get longer with each passing film: in 1992, his *Rebels of the Neon God* has a figure of just under 19 seconds per shot, much like Hou's earliest New Cinema films; by the time he comes out with *What Time Is It There?* (2001) nearly a decade later, his long takes now average more than a minute each. Most importantly, however, the longer Tsai's takes are on average as his career progresses, the more static they seem to become. In *The River* (1997), for example, the average length of a shot is under a minute each, yet there are camera movements in just over 40 percent of the shots (albeit a large number of those are either only momentary camera movements, or only the slightest reframings). By stark contrast, Tsai's film *Goodbye Dragon Inn* (2003), also has an average shot length of just under a minute per shot (55 seconds), yet less than 11 percent of those shots have any camera movement whatsoever, and once again most of those are only momentary camera movements at best. The most extreme example is *What Time Is It There?*: in this film the average shot length is now well over a minute, and yet *not a single one of those shots move, not even for the slightest reframing!*<sup>16</sup> Like Edward Yang, Tsai has taken other cues from Hou. Note the extreme (even barely legible) chiaroscuro lighting schemes in the bath house of *The River*, with only dim spots of lights in hallways and private rooms that barely reveal human outlines and furtive actions. Likewise, in *What Time Is It There?* carefully sculpted circles of light are often found in the interior scenes, especially a faint glow often directed at a large white fish in a tank (Figure 13.10). This seems to indicate a



Figure 13.10 Chiaroscuro in *What Time is it There?*

very conscious adaptation of lighting schemes Hou had been pushing since the beginning of the 1990s.

Hong Sang-soo has not been quite as literal in this regards as Tsai Ming-liang, exhibiting instead a more zig-zag appropriation of these same tendencies. Nevertheless, there is also palpable evidence in his films that Hou has been his guiding influence. For example, in *The Power of Kangwon Province* (1998), the average shot length is well over half a minute per shot, yet not a single one of them moves even in the slightest. A more recent work, *On the Occasion of Remembering the Turning Gate* (2002), averages around a minute per shot, and yet less than a quarter of those have any camera movements. More deceptive is his recent work, *Woman is the Future of Man* (2004). The numbers alone seem to suggest that Hong has abandoned the static camera much like Hou did in *Good Men, Good Women*: averaging a whopping 102 seconds per shot, 78 percent of these now have camera movements, a figure that is not surprising for a film with such monstrously long takes. But in almost every case these movements are at best only brief pans and slight reframings that occur only in a fraction of these long takes which otherwise are static. This is most noticeable in the two long takes that occur in the restaurant when Hunjoon and Munho eat and talk after not having seen each other for some time. The first of these long takes is just over six minutes in length, yet nearly five-and-a-half minutes of this shot is done in a completely static framing of the two men eating by the window. The camera pans briefly three times, the last of which reveals an



Figure 13.11 Predominant framing in scene from *Woman is the Future of Man*.

unnamed woman who had been in the restaurant, and who is now standing across the street. The second long take parallels the first both in terms of content and style. Being exactly five minutes in length, more than four and a half of those minutes stay put with the exact same framing of the two men eating by the window (Figure 13.11). Once again, a brief pan away and back is used to reveal that the same young woman has reappeared across the street yet again, a sort of ongoing, muted game of hide and seek.

While Hong does not usually employ the extreme chiaroscuro lighting of his Taiwanese counterparts, he certainly understands how the long take – especially the static, long take – allows the slightest changes to emerge from a seemingly minimalist image, quietly revealing subtle, yet rich emotional undertows. In *Turning Gate*, some of the longest static takes occur with Kyungsoo and Sunyoung. When they first meet on the train, for example, the shot begins with a pan right following him as he sits next to her. But for the rest of this nearly four-minute-long take, the camera does not move while his face remains at a more oblique angle and hers is more frontal, allowing her facial expressions to display a complex range of emotions resulting from her conflicted attraction to him. Even more remarkable are the two long takes when they eat together (roughly four minutes and two minutes respectively). Once again, Hong makes her face the main center of attention in both of these long takes. With painstaking deliberation, Sunyoung slowly gets Kyungsoo to remember that in fact they had once met 15 years ago in middle school, and that back then he had already pursued her at her home, much as he has just done this very day. Kyungsoo, in turn, only remembers all this when she moves her hand in a certain way (Figure 13.12), another example of where the smallest detail in this style can possess deep connotations.





Figure 13.12 An epiphany during a long take from *On the Occasion of Remembering the Turning Gate*

In short, Hou Hsiao-hsien created a distinctive style that did not send shock-waves throughout Asia, but slow ripples that first hit Japan, then Korea, and now Mainland China. He stands at the center of a quiescent movement that has developed of its own accord, guided most of all by the most striking surface features of Hou's earlier works: long takes and a static camera. In particular films by Kore-eda, Lee Kwang-mo, Tsai Ming-liang, and Hong Sang-soo, we have not just Hou imitators, but Hou literalists who dot every "i" and cross every "t" to the point where they may not move the camera even a fraction of an inch during an entire film, something Hou never quite does. Only a few begin to touch on the more inimitable aspects of Hou's style. As Bordwell notes, "Few of these films engage in the intricacies of staging that Hou favored; most rely on simple figure movements and attenuated scenic development."<sup>17</sup> Visually speaking Tsai Ming-liang gets everything down about Hou except for one feature: the density of the mise-en-scene. In Tsai's case, characters are often lost in desolate, seemingly abandoned urban landscapes, especially in the case of *The Hole* (1998) where normally teeming Taipei has been depleted of humanity due to a strange virus. Likewise, Hong Sang-soo does not come anywhere near the complexity of Hou in terms of mise-en-scene and narrative structure, although he does on occasion make use of some of the more understated aspects of cinematic staging.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, both Tsai and Hong do show other possibilities of this style, since each has used it to create a body of films that bear their own individual authorial signatures.

Yet as we have seen, even before the reverberations of this transnational Asian movement made themselves apparent in film festivals around the world, the center of the resonance was already missing; Hou had already moved beyond his most salient contribution to Asian cinema, no longer abiding by half of his own legacy.

For this reason it is almost shocking how with *Good Men, Good Women*, not only does Hou begin to move the camera, he does so with seemingly reckless abandon. If Tsai Ming-liang and Hong Sang-soo are audacious in taking this static long-take style to new statistical extremes, Hou is equally audacious in going in another entirely new direction, one that is less-easily defined, resulting in the “twists, turns, and complications” that Zhu Tianwen describes.

But why? Certainly Hou has never considered such widespread imitation a form of flattery, stating that every director should find his or her own style.<sup>19</sup> Still, Hou did not abandon this style because of too many imitators (unlike Wong Kar-wai and his own signature style). After all, while shooting *Good Men, Good Women*, Hou could not have yet known how much Kore-eda was imitating his earlier style in *Maborosi*, which came out the same year. For this reason, we are forced to look elsewhere for the reason behind this radical break. The answer lies quite close to home.

### **Hou’s fate as a Taiwanese filmmaker**

By departing with one of the most salient traits of his rarefied esthetic – namely the static camera – Hou Hsiao-hsien has been toying not only with his own identity as a filmmaker, but also the identity of Taiwanese cinema as a whole, and even that of East Asian cinema, an identity he played no small part in forming. Yet perhaps we should not be surprised by any of this so long as we remember that Hou is a *Taiwanese* director. Perhaps the sudden shift in 1995 in itself makes Hou the avatar of a specifically Taiwanese identity, and to a lesser extent his identity as an Asian director. After all, is this the first and only time he has changed?

A closer inspection of Hou’s career overall reveals that while this may be the most significant change for him, it is neither the first nor the last. The same Hou who in 1984 came out with such films as *The Boys from Fengkuei* and *A Summer at Grandpa’s*, came out with bubble gum musical comedies such as *Cute Girl* and *Cheerful Wind* just three years before. (Now there’s a radical break!) He began to use a more distanced framing in *Boys*, and then began to use the static camera in an unorthodox fashion starting with *A Summer at Grandpa’s*. Working for the first time with Mark Lee Pingbin in *The Time to Live, The Time to Die* resulted in a significant shift in lighting styles and more experimentation with depth of field. By the time he made *Dust in the Wind*, Hou Hsiao-hsien was able to combine all of this into a complete package, marking the culmination of all of the changes that occurred during his New Cinema period. But who expected him to shift to the disaffected youth of present day Taipei in *Daughter of the Nile*? Who expected for him to shift away from stories of people he personally knew to those of a past generation, as he does in *A City of Sadness*? Who expected the sudden appearance of Li Tianlu nearly 50 minutes into *The Puppetmaster*? And who ever expected Hou to make a film about a nineteenth century brothel in Shanghai (*Flowers of Shanghai*), or a film set in Japan (*Café Lumière*)? Taking all of this into consideration, the mobile camera in *Good Men, Good Women* is hardly alone as a marked change in Hou’s career. Instead it shows that change has in fact been the norm for Hou Hsiao-hsien from the beginning.

More importantly, we should not be surprised by these sudden changes for another reason: change has been the thematic core of Hou's films. In other words, Hou has given Taiwanese cinema an identity not just through style alone, but by using that style to convey the unique flavor of what is now commonly called "The Taiwanese Experience." And if anything sums up both the Taiwanese Experience and Hou's films, it is sudden, unexpected, and often irreversible changes. In the earlier films such changes often involved unexpected personal loss: the sudden death of a father (*The Boys from Fengkuei*, *The Time to Live*, *The Time to Die*), or the sudden loss of an unforgettable love, such as occurs without warning in *Dust in the Wind*. With the weightier historical trilogy, personal loss becomes a metaphor for abrupt national changes: in *A City of Sadness*, the Lin family seated at the table in 1945, versus the Lin family in 1949 with its male side depleted by the ravages of outside historical forces; for Li Tianlu in *The Puppetmaster*, all the lives, the deaths, and the journeys experienced between a time when his Qing-style queue was cut off by the Japanese, to his witnessing of the dismantling of Japanese fighter planes for spare parts at the end of the war; in *Good Men, Good Women*, those from Taiwan who fought for China were in the end betrayed by the Chinese who later found refuge in Taiwan after the war. The quiescent nature of Hou's films can often cause one to forget how traumatic the events depicted in them really are.

Except that in the case of the Taiwanese, perhaps change is no longer so traumatic: in fact, it may be the Taiwanese are just "used" to it. Consider the suddenness of Taiwan's economic miracle, the diplomatic shocks of the 1970s, the thoroughgoing democratization which occurred seemingly overnight, the constant vagaries of Taiwan's troubled relationship with China. This is an ongoing story, and the Taiwanese just seem to respond to change almost with a collective shrug of their shoulders. Thus, if this has been what Hou's films are about, and if change itself is part and parcel of what it means to Taiwanese, then perhaps what we should ask about Hou's now mobile camera is not why, but why not?

So the deeper significance of a mobile camera is that this does not just concern a director and his unusual aesthetic – this concerns Taiwan, and cuts to the core of what is Taiwan's place in the world. In the geopolitical sense, Taiwan has not just been pushed to the margins, it has been placed in a NeverNeverland that is a virtual abyss. Benedict Anderson has argued that every nation's sense of itself – as a nation – is fiction.<sup>20</sup> But Taiwan is one of those rare places where the average person is acutely aware of this on a daily basis. Yet remarkably, Taiwan has managed to stake a place in the world despite these impossible odds. Its economic prowess is not seen in numbers alone, but in how it has made itself an integral part of our hi-tech world.<sup>21</sup> Yet culturally speaking, Taiwan can even be seen as a vanguard of sorts, especially for China. Not only does the island "nation" serve as living proof that a Confucian culture can democratize (much to the chagrin of the Chinese Communist Party in China), it serves as a premier example that dynamism and inventiveness are not alien to Asian cultures. And given that it has occurred not just in cinema but elsewhere such as modern dance, as seen in the Cloud Gate Company<sup>22</sup>, such is not without precedent on this particular island.

This is where Hou's true significance lies: many outside of Taiwan have followed his lead, and together have created a distinctive body of films which have become commonplace in film festivals today. The films of Hou Hsiao-hsien, Edward Yang, Tsai Ming-liang, and Hong Sang-soo are among the more subtle and sophisticated to be found anywhere at the present time. Moreover, these films are beholden to no tradition except that of their own creation. That a Taiwanese director is the originator of all this says a great deal. Yet that Hou is willing to go beyond this transnational style he helped abet may be his way of saying: "We have done this, but why stop there? What's next?" With Hou, just as with Taiwan in general, there is so much to be learned than merely a static camera or a label like "MIT" ("Made in Taiwan"). We ought to take both a little more seriously than we do. We should also forgo ready-made conclusions and dig deeper.

Perhaps this should be a lesson for all of us. One flaw with the auteur theory is the tendency to look only for consistent themes and stylistic signatures emerging in an industrial morass. Any changes discovered have to fit within a discernible progression or pattern of development. Moreover, in the case of an Asian auteur like Hou there is often the additional baggage of "tradition" thrown into the critical pot. The notion of tradition seems contrary to the notion of change. But tradition is only one part of Asia and Asian cinema; and traditions in Asia have changed many times over even before the encroachment of the West. Such changes have been traumatic at times, violent at others. But what is remarkable about places like Taiwan is that streak of adaptability and flexibility that has served them so well. So long as we take a dynamic, and not a static view of these societies and their cultures, so long as we recognize that change is the norm, not the exception, then certainly we can accept it when a renowned director like Hou Hsiao-hsien suddenly moves. In the end, maybe we need neither praise the change, nor condemn it, nor even explain it. Maybe we just have to accept it, and then wait and see what happens next.

## Appendix A

Hou Hsiao-hsien's long-take style up to 1993.

<i>Title</i>	<i>ASL (secs)</i>	<i>Shots with camera movement (%)</i>
<i>The Sandwich Man</i> (1983)	17	26
<i>The Boys from Fengkuei</i> (1984)	19	45
<i>A Summer at Grandpa's</i> (1984)	18	32
<i>The Time to Live, The Time to Die</i> (1985)	24	23
<i>Dust in the Wind</i> (1986)	35	18
<i>Daughter of the Nile</i> (1987)	28	11
<i>A City of Sadness</i> (1989)	42	29
<i>The Puppetmaster</i> (1993)	83	29

## Appendix B

Hou's post-1995 long-take style and that of other notable long-take directors

<i>Director</i>	<i>Film Title</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>ASL (secs)</i>	<i>Shots with camera movement (%)</i>
Mizoguchi	<i>47 Ronin</i>	1941	89	62
Mizoguchi	<i>Utamaro and His Five Women</i>	1946	52	68
Mizoguchi	<i>Life of Oharu</i>	1952	48	60
Jancsó	<i>The Red and the White</i>	1968	54	84
Angelopoulos	<i>Traveling Players</i>	1975	105	88
Jancsó	<i>Hungarian Rhapsody</i>	1977	59	63
Angelopoulos	<i>Voyage to Cythera</i>	1984	67	74
Angelopoulos	<i>Landscape in the Mist</i>	1988	79	67
Hou	<i>Good Men, Good Women</i>	1995	108	72
Hou	<i>Goodbye, South Goodbye</i>	1996	105	80
Hou	<i>Flowers of Shanghai</i>	1998	158	82
Hou	<i>Millennium Mambo</i>	2001	97	82
Hou	<i>Café Lumière</i>	2003	66	76

## Notes

- 1 To be fair, only one-fifth of the shots in this film have camera movements that last for more than half of the duration of the shot. Another one-fifth of the shots have only the slightest reframing, while nearly two-fifths have noticeable camera movements, but which occur for less than half of the shots' duration. So there is some justification for the initial impressions of some that this "seemed" like a more static camera.
- 2 Zhu Tianwen, *Good Men, Good Women [Hao nan hao nü]* (Taipei: Maitian, 1995), 8.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 17–18.
- 4 Hou Hsiao-hsien, interview by author, Sinomovie Company Office, Taipei, Taiwan, June 20, 2001.
- 5 Zhu, 14–15.
- 6 Hou, interview by author, 2001.
- 7 Chen Huaien, interview by author, Taipei, Taiwan, Chang Tso-chi Film Studio, May 1, 2001.
- 8 Hou, interview by author, 2001. Hou says that while shooting *A Summer at Grandpa's*, he and his crew had a daily noon siesta imposed on them by the real grandfather at the clinic, then over 80 years old, who always required a daily nap right after lunch. According to him, he fell in love with that quiet stillness around the clinic, and he began to use the static camera to try to capture that same feeling thereafter. This does not mean, however, that Hou was fully aware of how far he had gone with this tendency by 1993. He seemed genuinely surprised when he was told that in *The Puppetmaster* 70 percent of the shots did not move at all.
- 9 James Udden, "Hou Hsiao-hsien and the Question of a Chinese Style," *Asian Cinema* 13, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2002): 54–75.
- 10 Georgia Brown, quoted in Zhu, 14.
- 11 David Bordwell, *Figures Traced in Light: On Cinematic Staging* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 217.

- 12 Please keep in mind that both average shot lengths and the percentage of shots with camera movements are in themselves crude measures. They are best taken as starting points and not complete answers in and of themselves. For example, in some cases a long take might have a camera movement which only occurs for a brief part of the entire shot; in other cases the camera movement might be incessant. The percentages I give here do not take these vast differences into account, although elsewhere I have noted that in Hou's films up to 1993 half of those rare shots that do have camera movements often have barely perceptible camera movements, which means essentially almost no change in framing. In general, however it is difficult to measure the wide variety of possible camera movements in a concrete way, and certainly not statistically: they can only be analyzed and described in a case-by-case fashion, just as I have done for the above scenes from *Good Men, Good Women*. Still, the fact that such a significantly smaller percentage of Hou's shots up to 1993 have camera movements compared to other long-take directors does at least indicate that he was pushing the static long take further than most other directors. So in this case, these percentages do tell us something, even if not everything.
- 13 This book will arguably rank as one of the most ambitious and accomplished in Bordwell's illustrious career, causing some readers to appreciate qualities of this medium that are often overlooked. However, even Bordwell seems to acknowledge that such esthetic qualities that he describes can be elusive, and thus lost on many viewers, especially those used to the forced attention-grabbing of today's highly edited films, a global trend he has dubbed "intensified continuity." One can hope the book will aid many in understanding and appreciating Hou Hsiao-hsien (especially since the cover includes an image from *Flowers of Shanghai*). But this remains a difficult task.
- 14 Edmond Wong, "A Youth of a Chaotic Generation, Statues of Dust," *Cinema in the Republic of China Yearbook, 1993* (Zhonghuaminguo dianying nian jian 1993) (Taipei: National Film Archives, 1993), 13.
- 15 Bordwell, 231.
- 16 Obviously this figure does not include the four shots used from *The 400 Blows*, two of which have camera movements.
- 17 Bordwell, 232.
- 18 David Bordwell even analyzes the staging of a scene from Hong's *Oh, Soo Yeong!* (2002) in the opening chapter of *Figures in Light*. See Bordwell, 5–7.
- 19 Hou, interview by author, 2001.
- 20 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, revised edn (New York: Verso, 1983, 1991).
- 21 Remember that when the 9/21 earthquake hit Taiwan in 1999, many economic pundits worried about a worldwide depression hitting the hi-tech industry, which is evidence enough as to how integral Taiwan has become in the computer chip industry.
- 22 I am eternally grateful to my fellow Fulbright scholar, Sansan Kwan, who while in Taiwan introduced me to this remarkable company, something I then got to see first-hand while in Taipei. I cannot say anything about modern dance. But I can testify that my experience of seeing this group perform was much like my initial experience with the films of Hou Hsiao-hsien: they were strange, wonderful, different, and somehow not reducible to either "Eastern" or "Western" categories.