

Ozu by Hou Hsiao-hsien: The Poetics of Bodies and Emptiness

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The aim of this paper is to analyse Yasujiro Ozu's influence on the work of Taiwanese filmmaker Hou Hsiao-hsien. Although film criticism has found obvious links between Ozu and Hou, the latter has always been reluctant to admit direct stylistic influences from the Japanese director; in an interview with Lee Ellickson in 2002 for *Cineaste*, he expressed clear disagreement with the habitual comparison. However, the relationship between Hou and Ozu is documented in an exceptional work: Hou's *film-homage* to the Japanese director, *Café Lumière* (*Kôhî jikô*, 2003). Taking this film as a starting point, we will explore the extent to which traces of Ozu's films are present in Hou's filmography and the similarities that can be established between the two filmmakers.

***Café Lumière*, Ozu-Hou**

Both the formal styling, unmistakable in the long-distance shots with door frames in the foreground and the action in the background, and the treatment of similar themes or the de-dramatisation of the plot have led Hou to be considered a natural heir of Ozu. In 2003, the Japanese studio Shochiku (where Ozu made most of his films), to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Ozu's birth, chose Hou as one of the possible contemporary directors to shoot a film paying homage to Ozu. Hou accepted the challenge entailed in representing a culture different from his own and directing Japanese actors—

whose performances he would be unable to assess fully due to his ignorance of the Japanese language—and began working on *Café Lumière*. His aim would be to continue working on his main thematic affinity with the Japanese director: the transformations to contemporary society expressed through generation gaps. Hou believes that Ozu succeeded in an area where, in his opinion, he himself had failed: “he envied Ozu’s success in portraying contemporary Japan, which was something that Hou felt he had been unable to do with contemporary Taiwan” (UDDEN, 2009: 172-173), perhaps due to the limited impact that *Goodbye South, Goodbye* (Nan guo zai jian, nan guo, Hou Hsiao-hsien, 1996) and *Millennium Mambo* (Hou Hsiao-hsien, 2001) had in his own country. Conversely, *Café Lumière* was very well-received in Japan and Hou felt extremely satisfied with what he had achieved in it: “I feel that this film and its atmosphere will last forever.”¹

The plot of *Café Lumière* to a large extent recreates Ozu’s filmography: the dramatic axis of the film revolves around the announcement of its protagonist, Yoko, to her parents that she is going to have a baby with her Taiwanese boyfriend but that she is not going to marry him: “I can raise the child alone,” she tells them. This, of course, greatly worries her father and stepmother. Yoko reaffirms her independence in circumstances very similar to several of Ozu’s films, in which women are reluctant to get married, as in *Late Spring* (Banshun, Yasujirō Ozu, 1949), *Late Autumn* (Akibiyori, Yasujirō Ozu, 1960) or *The End of Summer* (Kohayagawa-ke no aki, Yasujirō Ozu, 1961), in which the widow Aiko stubbornly rejects her family’s attempts to get her to remarry. Other iconographic elements are also strongly reminiscent of Ozu’s films: shots of clothes hanging out to dry, elevated trains, or entrances to houses in which the characters slowly come into frame. Even the everyday incidents are similar: Yoko, like Noriko in *Tokyo Story* (Tokyo monogatari, Yasujirō Ozu, 1953), borrows sake and a glass from a neighbour. Eating rituals exhibit recognisable patterns adapted to present times: Yoko’s father, seated, asks his wife for some food “to go with the beer”, while she is busy in the kitchen; however, when Yoko welcomes her parents into her apartment, we can see she is not so submissive.

In visual terms, to explain the origins of his long-distance shots (which are also an Ozu trademark), the source Hou cites is not cinematic: the autobiography of Chinese writer Shen Tzunwen, whose narrative structure takes a distanced, objective panoramic view of the events, which was something that Hou had been seeking to emulate since his early films. Based on this idea, when filming *A Time to Live and a Time to Die* (Tong nien wang shi, Hou Hsiao-hsien, 1985), Hou urged his cinematographer to take a position further away from the action. On

other occasions, Hou has also expressed the need to film scenes from a distance using long focal length lenses so as not to interfere with the performance of his non-professional actors, and thus avoid capturing small errors in their work. Beyond this occasional functional need, Hou’s concern for finding the right perspective on the action is a crucial element in his films and could be considered the essential feature he found in Ozu’s work: the distancing, the apparent de-dramatisation, the search for an objective point of view: “in Ozu’s films, the context and the atmosphere feel very realistic; he was able to adopt a very objective point of view to observe things and capture them precisely.”² Scriptwriter Chu Tien-wen, who has collaborated closely with Hou since *All the Youthful Days* (Fengkuei-lai-te Jen, Hou Hsiao-hsien, 1983),

also identifies this as the Japanese director’s greatest influence on Hou: “This is how I see Ozu’s influence on Hou: a way of observing that keeps its distance in relation to the here and now” (CIMENT and NIOGRET, 2004: 8).

Moreover, the visual style of *Café Lumière* not only recreates the distinctive static camera of Ozu’s final period (although not positioned as low as was typical of the Japanese filmmaker), but also uses slow pans, especially in outdoor scenes, that could be an approximation of Ozu’s style in the 1920s and 1930s, when his films were notable for frequent camera movements. In this sense, it could be argued that Hou follows an evolution similar to that taken by Ozu in his day, described by Burch in terms of simplification and stylisation: “the narrative dissolution is associated with an increasing stylisation of editing procedures. Camera movements are subjected to a swift radicalisation through numerical reduction, specialisation and geometrisation” (BURCH, 1979: 156). However, Hou’s use of distancing in *Café Lumière* is especially striking for the way it holds the audience back from the characters—there are hardly any close-ups, and the first time we see Yoko’s face clearly is on her train journey to her parents’ house, 17 minutes into the film—while for Ozu the faces of his characters constituted an essential element of his films. Furthermore, in contrast with Ozu’s abundant, rapid-fire dialogue, the film is characterised by long silences and slow-paced exchanges: “Yoko’s awkward conversations with her parents never achieve the smooth flow of dialogue that is so essential for Ozu” (FUJIWARA, 2004: 15). And finally, the rigorous formalism of the elements present in Ozu’s shots—in terms of the arrangement of objects and characters and, in his colour films, the meticulous use of the

THIS IS HOW I SEE OZU’S INFLUENCE ON HOU: A WAY OF OBSERVING THAT KEEPS ITS DISTANCE IN RELATION TO THE HERE AND NOW



Late Spring and *Café Lumière*. Ozu's meticulous compositions become brusquer in Hou's films; nevertheless, the backlighting or the objects on the table and in the background are factors that accentuate the body language of the characters

colour palette, always in an effort to connect the meticulous composition of the shot with the dramatic requirements of each scene—is absent in *Café Lumière*, which has a *mise-en-scène* apparently less concerned with such formalism; it seems clear that, in spite of some analogous elements, the two directors have a very different sense of staging and composition. This is something that reinforces the personal quality of Hou's film, as if he had decided not to imitate Ozu's style but rather to explore Ozu's world in his own language: thus, there is one sequence that brings to mind the silent films of the Japanese director, when Yoko leaves her friend Hajime's bookshop while the piano music of the Taiwanese composer (which we began hearing inside the shop) continues to play, and the camera pans slowly: a tribute much more effective than literal imitation.

Hou's language

Thus, as Hou himself has always claimed, although his cinematic language bears certain similarities to Ozu's, it is by no means directly indebted to the Japanese master's style. Nevertheless, it is possible to detect in Hou's films some other perceptive echoes that are much subtler. In Hou's films, the studied ambiguity of his language provokes an *instability* in the spectator, who is encouraged to construct his or her own meanings. Adrian Martin remarks on this sensation that his films provoke: "In the films of Hou [...], we are constantly confronted, during our first viewing, with the question: 'What's happening?' – in the storyline as a whole, and in any given scene" (MARTIN, 2008, 258). There are some narrative aspects whose ambiguity will be cleared up in subsequent viewings, but the initial feeling of being confronted with an inscrutable meaning is an essential characteristic of his films. It is undeniable that Hou's films convey a terrific energy, and that this energy arises as much from the doubt provoked in the spectator as from the tension produced by the physicality of the bodies shown in the shot. This is noticeable even in his first truly personal

film: *All the Youthful Days*. An essentially autobiographical work, shot on location with mostly non-professional actors, this film evokes connections with the premises of the documentary form. This observation could in fact be applied to his whole autobiographical cycle up to *Dust in the Wind* (Hou Hsiao-hsien, 1987), a film that reflects the creative interest, shared by other Taiwanese writers and filmmakers of Hou's generation, in exploring the history of their country in an effort to define Taiwanese identity. As noted above, by that time Hou had already identified the perspective he was looking for, which was directly linked to Ozu's filmography, and completely removed from the documentary mode. The idea of distancing and the objective point of view would be adopted from the cinematic codes of the French New Wave: "For me, realism is not about reconstructing an event, but reconstructing an experience from one's own perception. In this sense, European cinema has helped me a lot. Thanks to films like Godard's *Breathless* and Pialat's *Loulou*, I have learned to free myself of the limitations imposed by the logic and obligations of editing. I have learned to throw out any useless shots" (ASSAYAS, 2006: 278-279).³

In *All the Youthful Days* this visual strength can be perceived in the way the *bodies in the shot* impose themselves on the development of the plot. While his visual codes have become increasingly stylised over the years, Hou's films essentially communicate with the spectator through the power of the physical presence of his characters in the two-dimensional space of the shot. Although it is easy to observe a progressive decrease in importance of plot, especially in his later films set in contemporary times, in a pattern similar to the increasing simplicity of the plots in Ozu's films (compare, for example, *I Was Born, But...* [Otona no miru ehon - Umarete wa mita keredo, Yasujirō Ozu, 1932] with Ozu's remake almost thirty years later, *Good Morning* [Ohayō, Yasujirō Ozu, 1959]), the physicality of Hou's characters is evident in all his films. Even in *A City of Sadness* (Beiqing chengshi, Hou Hsiao-hsien, 1989), a film in which the

narrative tension is of vital importance, the bodies *are* the story: “Hou neither shoots a story nor illustrates an idea; he films bodies that have trouble living (the eldest son), returning (the second son), reasoning (the third) and communicating (the youngest one)” (DE BAECQUE, 2006: 286). After making *A Time to Live and a Time to Die*, Hou saw Ozu’s silent film *I Was Born, But...* in Paris, and found reflected in it his own interest in the expressiveness of bodies on the screen: “I think the absence of sound is quite interesting, because there is no dialogue to rely upon. The images, the sense of movement and the behaviour of the characters had to communicate the whole meaning.”³ His tributes to silent cinema, such as *A City of Sadness* and *All the Youthful Days*, along with his use of metalinguistic narrative devices, reflect his interest in studying the communicative mechanisms of language used over the course of the history of cinema.

As Martin (2008: 261-263) points out, the spectator’s doubts about *what is happening* arise, first of all, on the narrative level, due to the lack of expository dialogue. Such clues are largely absent from Hou’s films, especially in his later films, which have none of the structures typical of melodrama. Thus, in Hou’s stories it is more important to leave the spectator in the dark, in almost every scene change, about the spatial-temporal situation of the characters. This strategy—used, for example, in *Café Lumière* when, after paying a visit to her parents’ house, without any transition, Yoko is suddenly in the Café Erika in Tokyo—prompts the spectator to look for clues that will identify the new location of the spatial-temporal discourse. Similarly, an oft-noted trademark of Ozu’s that serves the same purpose is “the inclusion of the so-called ‘pillow-shots’ (also known as ‘cutaway still lifes’), whose purpose is generally associated with the filmmaker’s desire to disrupt the narrative flow, suspending its meaning and providing spaces for the construction of alternative meanings” (ZUNZUNEGUI, 1993: 18). However, this does not imply that Hou’s main focus

Millennium Mambo. The film within a film in Hou, in addition to evoking a sense of nostalgia, is always a kind of metaphor for the art of storytelling



is to deconstruct narrative codes, because, ultimately, the spectator is always intensely aware that the discourse of the story is unfolding: “He discloses a surprisingly wide range of feelings in what might seem a detached perspective on the action. His films are melodramas but refined ones; as in Mizoguchi, emotion is not erased but purified” (BORDWELL, 2005: 191). Any approach to Hou’s poetics must therefore take into account that the stylisation of his language is only a means of establishing a contemporary mode of telling a story. De Baecque calls Hou’s language “*the Hou*”, paraphrasing Rivette’s definition of *the Mizoguchi*: “*the Hou*, his language, is a universal idiom, because it suspends meaning from the first to the last sequence [...], it is made up of simple, mysterious shots, in a constantly preserved state of sensitivity” (DE BAECQUE, 2006: 285).

This suspension of meaning, as Martin (2008) suggests, is also the result of close attention to the film’s audio, which often functions as a metalinguistic exercise, spotlighting the mechanics of filmic fiction. The most outstanding example is, without doubt, *Millennium Mambo*. In its captivating opening scene, a tracking shot filmed with a Steadicam invites the spectator to follow Vicky while she tells a *story*. The levels of different audio tracks rise and fall freely—the male protagonist, Hao-Hao, operating his mixing board, will visualise the idea—thereby generating an artificial sonic flow that disconnects the image from any real reference. The same effect will be maintained throughout the film: the mix of audio tracks and the interplay between narrative and extra-narrative sound establishes a personal rhetoric on cinematic sound. Finally, the film closes in a self-referential game with a scene that complements the first: a tracking shot over a snowy road introduces, first, Vicky’s voice-over, and then the film’s main theme. But this time, in a stylistic exercise, the nature of the narrative mode is made explicit: the camera pans from the sky down to the street and the theatres of Yubari in Japan, where Vicky and her Japanese friends talk, in Chinese and Japanese, about the movie posters. Meanwhile, on another audio track, Vicky’s voice-over goes on with the story. In addition, in another rhetorical loop, she draws on another tale—the story of the country of snowman—to end her narration with shots of the posters. Tales within tales: in a game of mirrors, the narrator leaves the narrative to tell her story in third person. The whole film is simply a captivating hallucination, a repetitive tale with no end: contemporary cinematic expression as a support for timeless dreams and stories.

FOR ME, REALISM IS NOT ABOUT RECONSTRUCTING AN EVENT, BUT RECONSTRUCTING AN EXPERIENCE FROM ONE’S OWN PERCEPTION



Millennium Mambo. The tracking-shot at the beginning of the film is an invitation to follow Vicky's story

Emptiness in Eastern poetics

As noted above, the suspension of meaning in film narrative has been also observed in Ozu's films with his inclusion of shots unrelated to the film narrative. Hou also employs this device, even in his first films (films with a tight and developed plot, like *A Time to Live and a Time to Die* or *A City of Sadness*), and the emotional complexity of the images arises from both the narrative conflict portrayed and from the iconic meaning of the *empty* moments (ZHÈN, 1994). These *empty* shots, with no narrative meaning, need to be understood according to the complex dialectic between form and content in Eastern culture. The difficulty faced by the Western spectator in interpreting this dialectic has often been cited as a reason for the inability of Western audiences to grasp all of the meanings in Hou's films (HEREDERO, 2001). Zhèn offers some clues to help unravel these meanings: "These 'blank spaces' in the structure point toward ambiguous readings and interpretations, as well as toward experience and understanding. In the Western literary tradition, tragedy is often expressed as a climax of conflict and destruction, but in the East, in Chinese literature, 'fate is often a blank space, a blank image, a great, incessant rhythm, resounding beyond human control, irresistible, transcending the individual'" (ZHÈN, 1994: 77). It is easy to find these still, empty moments, stripped of narrative tension in the Eastern film tradition, Yasujiro Ozu of course being an archetypal example. In his film *Late Spring*, such shots, juxtaposed with narrative sequences, have been the subject of numerous studies aimed at decoding their meaning. Zunzunegui (1993), noting their emotional complexity, moves away from the purely formalist approaches of Thompson and Bordwell in an effort to get closer to the Eastern view, and points to the need to establish a multiplicity of meanings. "It is precisely this 'perception of arbitrariness' that gives these images their main value: their meaning is simply that no meaning can be attributed to them other than the fact that they have no single meaning. They are true 'signs in rotation', which can produce what Rubert de Ventós

defined, when describing the 'logic' of Japanese thought, with the words: 'there is no pure signifier or signified in the strict sense [...]' (ZUNZUNEGUI, 1993: 22).

Abundant examples of Ozu's *empty shots* can be found in Hou's films. At the end of one of his first films, *A Summer at Grandpa's* (Hou Hsiao-hsien, 1984), there is a meaningful shot, also essential to the narrative, in which the camera frames some trees, then traces an arc moving up into the sky, and finally pans down and frames the grandfather and his grandson, just as the old man explains to the boy the only thing parents can do for their children: to teach them universal values. This shot could be regarded as a fusion of the poetics of emptiness inserted in the same narrative sequence that moves from the universal to the particular; but this is merely a crude simplification, because, as noted above with respect to Ozu's films, to separate these two functions would obscure the complexity of the images. Nevertheless, focusing our attention on these shots, in contrast to or isolated from the rest of the visual narrative, would obscure the poetics present throughout the discourse. For example, we could also recognise them in Hou's work in those final moments when we are shown a sustained shot of empty rooms after the characters have left. At the same time, it is easy to appreciate the emotional mood, not only in the usual still shots detached from the narrative, but also in those which Hou often uses in his films set in contemporary times, filming long tracking shots of the characters in cars or on motorbikes through the city or from the city out to the countryside.

In short, meaning and its absence in Hou's films are inextricably linked in each scene. The *suspension of meaning* identified by De Baecque (2006) is accomplished through Hou's radical filming method. Action—or more precisely, activity—is constantly negated by the camera. The point of view is not merely distant, but actually veils the action taking place. In *Café Lumière*, Yoko and her parents visit their ancestors' graves; they arrange the flowers and clean the gravestones, and they are filmed with their backs to the camera, so that the characters and

what they are doing is largely concealed. Immediately thereafter, following another *empty shot* (a car coming to a train crossing), the family is eating at the bar of a restaurant. Once again, the characters have their backs to us and there is no dialogue. In these cases, the spectator tends to look for information in the image, watching the characters' faces or what they are doing. The image has been almost completely drained not just of narrative information but of any meaningful information. We can see the characters eating, playing pool, fighting, travelling, being born or dying... but Hou has stripped the images of any literal meaning and the image itself may simultaneously contain comedy and tragedy: all the complexity of *reality*.

The crucial connection between Hou and the Japanese master that we believe important to highlight is thus the poetics of emptiness unique to Eastern cultures, present in the work of both artists in different ways, giving rise to a *suspension of meaning*. Both filmmakers developed a personal language that confronts the spectator with the complexity of reality by multiplying the meanings in each scene. Their creative searches in pursuit of objectivity sought to open up possible readings rather than narrowing down meanings, and both gave birth to stylised cinematic codes, sometimes tangential but absolutely personal. ■



Café Lumière. The subtle beauty of the opening scene, while Yoko enters and exits the frame, is not only a reference to Ozu's iconography but a reflection of the complex Eastern poetics of emptiness

By way of conclusion: personal languages in search of objectivity

Beyond the obvious stylistic and plot connections between Ozu and Hou, it is important to note that Hou's narrative codes diverge in a personal way in search of a narrative modernism. In *Café Lumière* this intention is especially noticeable in the use of all kinds of devices typical of the film narrator—voice-over, intertitles, letters, dreams, memories, stories—to achieve a perception of reality through the narrative discourse itself. Hajime records sounds and draws trains on his computer. Yoko tells Hajime about a dream and he answers by presenting her a copy of Maurice Sendak's *Outside Over There*. Yoko reads the story to us, the audience, while showing us the illustrations. Hou shows us that meaning is not in the image captured by the camera, but in the filmic narrative that he has created by mixing all the codes, all the languages. The film ends with Yoko and Hajime recording sounds at a train station, and finally a shot of trains crossing in all directions flows into a pop song by Yo Hitoto (a well-known pop singer in Japan, who plays the role of Yoko in the film). Sound disconnected from images. The protagonist leaving the screen. Stories within stories to tell the audience to assume a new and fresh look at the world.

Notes

1. In *Métro Lumière: Hou Hsiao-hsien à la rencontre de Yasujiro Ozu*. (Harold Manning, 2004). A documentary film about Hou's approach to Ozu's cinema focusing on *Café Lumière*.
2. Statements made by Hou Hsiao-hsien in the documentary film *Talking with Ozu* (Yasuyoshi Tanaka, 1993), a tribute on the occasion of the 90th anniversary of Ozu's birth that compiles the impressions of filmmakers Lindsay Anderson, Claire Denis, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Aki Kaurismäki, Stanley Kwan, Paul Schrader and Wim Wenders.
3. As reflected in this statement made at the beginning of his career, Hou has often proclaimed the notable influence of Godard and other French New Wave directors on his work. He has also stated that his knowledge and appreciation of Ozu's work came later. For this reason, it would be interesting to pursue further research into the extent to which Godard is *interpreted* by Hou in his quest for realism.

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