

# City People: Youth and the Urban Experience in Hou Hsiao-Hsien's Later Films

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Outline

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*Millennium Mambo*

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## Abstract

While Hou Hsiao-Hsien has been celebrated primarily for his depictions of Taiwanese rural life, his films have also grappled with aspects of the urban experience, particularly in the latter part of his career. This paper examines metropolitan life in two of these more recent films, *Millenium Mambo* and *Café Lumière*, with an eye towards drawing out continuities with Hou's own earlier films and with those of his contemporaries. The films form an interesting pair because each features a lonely young woman caught up in complicated personal relationships and struggling to find meaningful connections amidst the anonymity and confusion of urban life. While *Mambo* is set in Taipei and *Café* in Tokyo, both women travel between the two cities, underscoring at once the universality of the postmodern metropolitan experience and the specific historical connection between Taiwan and Japan. My analysis aims to focus on a number of areas: architecture and the alienating effects of urban spaces; the effect of technology on human relationships; the motif of travel and its emotional correlative—that restlessness that Raymond Williams identifies in “modern men and women who do not so much relate as pass each other and sometimes collide.” Finally, I hope to argue that, in both of these films, it is through historical awareness that the young urban-dwellers are able to

find a sense of connectivity and purpose. It is this idea—that historical knowledge leads to redemption—that most strongly ties these later films to Hou's entire body of work.

Keywords: urban youth, postmodern metropolitan experience, historical awareness



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[In the urban novel] the general movement we remember—the characteristic movement—is a *hurrying, seemingly random passing of men and women, each heard in some fixed phrase, seen in some fixed expression: a way of seeing men and women that belongs to the street*. There is at first an absence of ordinary connection and development. These men and women do not so much relate as pass each other and sometimes collide. . . .

(Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*)<sup>1</sup>

Studies of Taiwanese New Cinema have often posited its two leading figures, Edward Yang and Hou Hsiao-Hsien, as opposite though complementary figures: Yang the poet of modern urban angst and Hou the chronicler of a rural life that is rapidly disappearing. Certainly, Yang is rightly celebrated for his sharp observations of the materialism and soullessness of life in modern Taipei—especially among Taiwanese

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford UP, 1973), p. 155.

youth—in films such as *The Terrorizer*, *Yi Yi* and *A Confucian Confusion*. Yet many of the urban themes he addresses—physical isolation, emotional vacuity, and spiritual rootlessness—run throughout the films of Hou Hsiao-Hsien as well.

Indeed, Hou has grappled with aspects of contemporary metropolitan life throughout his career. Earlier films such as *Daughter of the Nile* (尼羅河女兒, 1987), *Good Men Good Women* (好男好女, 1995), and *Goodbye South, Goodbye* (南國再見, 南國, 1996), all attempted a realistic engagement with some of the problems facing Taiwanese urban youth: an obsession with consumer culture, altered social relationships, a lack of direction and connectivity. In his more recent films, Hou has further sharpened his focus on the urban experience. This paper will examine two of these films, *Millennium Mambo* (千禧曼波, 2001) and *Café Lumière* (珈琲時光, 2003), with an eye towards drawing out continuities with Hou's own earlier films and with Yang's. The films form an interesting pair because each features a solitary young woman caught up in complicated personal relationships and struggling to find meaningful connections amidst the anonymity and confusion of urban life. While *Mambo* is set in Taipei and *Café* in Tokyo, both women travel between the two cities, underscoring at once the universality of the postmodern metropolitan experience and the specific historical connection between Taiwan and Japan. My analysis aims to focus on a number of areas: architecture and the alienating effects of urban spaces; the effects of technology on human

relationships; and the motif of travel along with its emotional correlative—that restlessness that Raymond Williams identifies in “modern men and women who do not so much relate as pass each other and sometimes collide.” Finally, I hope to argue that, in both of these films, it is through *historical awareness* that the young city-dwellers are able to find some sense of connectivity and purpose. It is this idea, that historical knowledge leads to the hope for redemption, that most strongly ties these later films to Hou’s entire body of work.

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## Re-mapping Taipei

In the 1994 article “Remapping Taipei,” Fredric Jameson’s insightful analysis of Edward Yang’s *The Terrorizer* (恐怖分子, 1986) practically canonized the film, with its overlapping stories of young urban professionals and idle youth from Taiwan’s growing middle-class, as an exemplary portrait of Taipei as postmodern metropolis. Indeed, its dystopic vision of the alienation and dehumanizing effects of capitalist urban culture brings to the fore so many important themes and motifs that would continue to be examined and explored in subsequent Taiwanese films, that his film provides a useful starting for any discussion of urban cinema in Taiwan.

One of the most important observations that Yang's film offers about metropolitan culture is the radically different way in which the urbanite experiences physical space. Colorless and foreboding, the architecture of the city divides human space into fragments, with roads that criss-cross horizontally and high-rise buildings of concrete, glass and steel that cut vertically into the sky, blotting out the sun. (Fig. 1) Modern Taipei, then, is "mapped and configured as a superimposed set of boxed dwelling spaces in which characters are all in one way or another confined."<sup>2</sup> This sense of confinement can be seen at its most visually-explicit in an image that recurs throughout Yang's film—a barking dog locked in a cage—but the idea of individuals being trapped in their own separate cells is expressed even more ominously in the stories of the film's four characters—each of whom is associated with his or her own urban prison. The nameless photographer is a bored young man from an affluent family, killing time as he awaits his draft notification. While he spends some of his time wandering the city streets with his telephoto-equipped camera shooting paparazzi-style pictures of accidents and crime scenes, he is often pictured holed up in a cramped apartment (and former murder-scene) that he has rented. Not only is the apartment almost completely barren of furniture or other domestic comforts, the young man has covered the windows with black-out paper, shutting out all natural light. The young girl he has

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<sup>2</sup> Fredric Jameson, "Remapping Taipei," *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics*, eds. Nick Browne, Paul Pickowitz, Vivan Sobchak, and Esther Yau (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), pp. 147-48.



been stalking, known as the White Chick, is similarly trapped in a claustrophobically-small apartment. A leg injury prevents her from leaving the room, but she is also literally imprisoned because her mother, hoping to keep the girl out of trouble, has locked her in. The other pair of characters in the film, the doctor Li Li-chung and his writer wife, Chou Yu-fen, are young professionals who have jobs to do and places to go in the city. Nevertheless, they are also associated with enclosed and isolated spaces. The doctor is shown primarily in the sterile and non-descript working spaces of the hospital and, once or twice, in the tight space of his car. Often, he is pictured in the tiny, windowless bathroom of his apartment, where he repeatedly and obsessively washes his hands. (Fig. 2) As a visual correlative of Li's mental state, the bathroom is illuminated by a dim bulb, casting a sickly yellowish glow on the doctor's face. His wife, an aspiring novelist, feels herself trapped by severe writer's block and suffocated by a general dissatisfaction with life. Her unhappiness has caused her to retreat further and further into the dark recesses of her study—a space into which even her husband is afraid to set foot.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

The psychic consequences of such physical isolation include self-absorption and emotional estrangement—the absence of communal feeling that has been condemned and lamented ever since the birth of the modern city. Friedrich Engels, for example, offered a harsh assessment of the city in the 19th-century as a place where people push

past each other on congested city streets without so much as a glance at or thought for others: “The brutal indifference, the unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest becomes the more repellent and offensive, the more these individuals are crowded together within a limited space.”<sup>3</sup> This self-centered indifference is starkly highlighted near the beginning of *The Terrorizer*, when the White Chick collapses in the middle of a crosswalk and no cars or passerby stop to help. The photographer does pause long enough to call an ambulance, but mostly because he has been stalking her with his camera and follows her as she flees a crime scene. The young man’s lack of emotional reaction to the violent shooting he has just witnessed is equally repellent. The young girl, caught up in criminal activities that include prostitution, an activity predicated on emotional indifference, is self-centered as well. Immobilized and bored in her mother’s apartment, she amuses herself by dialing numbers randomly picked out of a phone book. She invents nasty stories to tell to the unsuspecting person on the other end, with total disregard for whatever havoc her words might wreak. The telephone, like the camera a technological tool of the modern industrial age, allows her to menace complete strangers from a distance, with no accountability and no thought for the consequences.

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<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*, tran. F. K. Wischnewetsky (London, 1934), p. 24. Qtd. in Williams, *The Country and the City*, pp. 215-16.

If, as Williams has suggested, city people are so self-absorbed that they “do not so much relate as pass each other and sometimes collide,” then the marriage of Li Li-chung and Chou Yu-fen is a perfect illustration of this urban narcissism. Communication has never been good between them, as neither knows much about the other’s past or hopes for the future. Their lives, it seems, run mostly on parallel tracks. As Li struggles with guilt and jealousy over the job promotion he desperately wants and Chou becomes ever more frustrated by her writer’s block, rather than reach out to the other, each remains utterly absorbed in his or her own misery. Even when the two are together in their apartment, they are seldom pictured talking face-to-face. Instead, they speak from different rooms, and Yang’s camera angles and movements emphasize the literal wall between them. The few conversations they do have are not presented in the customary shot-counter-shot dialogue form, but in separate shots of each speaking his/her own piece in sequence—so it feels like each is venting for his/her own sake rather than trying to communicate feelings to the other.

Variations on this dark and dispiriting vision of urban life recur frequently in later Taiwanese films—certainly in Yang’s own subsequent films and in those of Tsai Ming-liang, his fellow poet of urban angst, but even in the oeuvre of Hou Hsiao-Hsien. Hou is more often associated with Taiwan’s rural past than its urban present, but Hou has in fact been interested in the sociocultural consequences of urbanization from quite early on. *The Boys from Feng Gui* (風櫃來的人,

1983) and *Dust in the Wind* (戀戀風塵, 1987), for instance, explore the contrast between life in the small villages of the Taiwanese countryside and that in its cities, though from the point of view of rural youth. His first film with an entirely urban setting was 1987's *Daughter of the Nile* (尼羅河女兒). Its protagonist, Hsiao-yang, is a disaffected teenage girl struggling to find her place in the disorienting urban surroundings of Taipei. With her mother dead and her father and brother estranged, she has few anchors in her life. Hsiao-yang spends her days bouncing around town amidst a jumble of symbols of consumer-oriented urban youth culture: she works at a local outlet of Kentucky Fried Chicken, she lounges around at the nightclub run by her brother and his gangster friends, dancing to American pop music; when she isn't half-heartedly attending night-school, she reads Japanese *manga* in her family's cramped dwelling. As in Yang's film, there are few clues to where any of these urban spaces might be in relation to one another, and they are photographed to emphasize their sterility and isolation. Consequently, the Taipei pictured in *Daughter* is as cold and unwelcoming as in *The Terrorizer*, drab and devoid of color except for the gaudy decor in the nightclub and the neon lights of the night scenes which are, in their own way, dizzying and alienating. A sense of urban chaos and menace is conveyed by the blur of lights and noise as Hsiao-yang goes on a nighttime motorcycle ride through the city streets (a motif that will be further developed in Hou's later films), as well as by the sudden

outbursts of street violence that seem to be an unavoidable part of the city landscape.

After *Daughter of the Nile*, Hou did not make another film that was set primarily in contemporary times until the mid-nineties, when he made two: *Good Men Good Women* (好男好女, 1995), and *Goodbye South, Goodbye* (南國再見·南國, 1996). In both, Hou expanded upon one aspect of city life touched upon only tangentially in Hsiao-yang's story: the criminal underworld. Hooligans, drifters, gangsters and other underworld elements have long been associated with the urban milieu, and particularly with the cinematic city. One need only think of *film noir* to understand the power of the criminal boss as a symbol of all that is simultaneously seductive and frightening about the city: "the real city, one might say, produces only criminals; the imaginary city produces the gangster: he is what we want to be and what we are afraid we might become."<sup>4</sup> The petty gangsters in *Goodbye South* are not quite the hardened criminals of Hollywood *film noir*, but might better be categorized as low-level hooligans—idle wastrels and restless drifters whose type of aimless existence is so well described by the Chinese term "*liumang*" (流氓).<sup>5</sup> Gao and his gang of cohorts spend a lot of time in the kind of dimly-lit urban spaces associated with the criminal

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Warshow, "The Gangster as Tragic Hero," *The Immediate Experience* (New York: Doubleday, 1962). Qtd. in Iain Chambers, *Popular Culture: The Metropolitan Experience* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 101.

<sup>5</sup> Chen Baoling, "To Be Defined a *Liumang*," *A History of Chinese Hooligans* (Beijing: Chinese Social Science, 1993). Qtd. in *Streetlife China*, ed. Michael Dutton (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), pp. 63-65.

world: gambling dens, back-alley restaurants and seedy nightclubs. They can also be found hanging around in cramped apartments and tiny hotel rooms, where the atmosphere of boredom and distraction is stifling. Their frustration and restless energy translates, in the film, into a constant movement that is random and directionless. Gao and the gang channel their continual need for some kind of action into a string of get-rich schemes of varying degrees of legality—including a ridiculous plot involving pig farmers and secret government contracts. Their undefined yearning also translates into hours spent wandering aimlessly by train, by motorcycle, and by car. Sometimes they travel through the wide-open and still-lush countryside, but more often they roam the crowded city streets, often circling late into the night. Just as their criminal schemes go nowhere, their aimless drifting also leads to nothing more than, at the end of the film, their car in a ditch by the side of an anonymous road.

Liang, the young woman at the center of *Good Men Good Women*, has also wasted much of her youth hanging out with drug addicts and gangsters, and is plagued by a similar existential malaise. The scenes in the film that are set in contemporary times (the others are scenes from a period movie Liang is making about the life of historical Taiwanese heroine Jiang Bi-yu (蔣碧玉) follow Liang's struggles to break free of her crime and drug-addled recent past in order to find some kind of footing in the present. The spaces within which she moves—her dark and cluttered apartment, (Fig. 3) the noisy bars and clubs she restlessly

frequents, (Fig. 4) the eerie blue-lit interior of an enclosed badminton court—all contribute to a never-ending cycle of confinement and desperation. To make her imprisonment even worse, someone is leaving mysterious phone messages and faxing her pages from her own stolen diary—pages that painfully detail her previous involvement with the criminal underworld. The anonymous technological menace that torments her is the equivalent of those harassing phone calls made by the White Chick in *The Terrorizer*. Throughout the film, Liang's emotional stagnation is contrasted with the life of Jiang Bi-yu, the patriot whom she plays in her movie. Jiang may have been subjected to real physical confinement for her political activities but, because her life was animated by a sense of duty to home and family, by a defined political purpose, and by sociohistorical awareness, she never suffered the kind of psychic imprisonment that torments Liang. Towards the end of the film there is a hint that Liang might gradually break out of her soulless existence as she begins to identify with the film character she plays. By attempting to draw some connections between the traumas suffered by the historical heroine and her own life, Liang could, the film suggests, eventually move towards some kind of redemption.





Fig. 3



Fig. 4

### *Millennium Mambo*

A glimmer of redemption also lies in the future of Vicky, the young woman whose story is told in *Millennium Mambo*, but that ray of hope does not begin to glow until deep into the film. Until then, its

portrait of urban youth revisits much of the same ground as Hou's previous films—consumer culture and material excess, physical isolation and emotional estrangement, restless yearning—but with even greater intensity. The film opens with a disorienting barrage of sensory stimuli that beautifully captures the structure of feeling associated with metropolitan life. From the earliest days of urban theory, it has been noted that the psychological basis of experience in the modern metropolis is fundamentally different from that of the small town and rural existence of the past. In the small town psyche, the experience of life rests on “deeply felt and emotional relationships” and a rhythm of life that is slow, steady and habitual. City life, by contrast, is characterized by:

. . . the intensification of nervous stimulation which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli . . . the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions. These are the psychological conditions that the metropolis creates.<sup>6</sup>

The opening sequences of Edward Yang's *Terrorizer* depicted this turmoil of the streets with its images of a congested city at night:

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<sup>6</sup> George Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1903), ed. and trans. Kurt H. Wolff, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (New York: Free, 1964), pp. 409-24.

streams of bright lights from passing cars, the roar of engines, the relentless honking of horns, and the wail of sirens piercing the night air. Hou's earlier urban films likewise tried to capture the frenetic energy and sometimes overwhelming sensory stimuli of the city through the use of super-saturated disco and neon lights paired with the perpetual beat of pop and club music on the soundtrack. Nowhere is that phantasmagoria of sensory overload and "libidinal abandon in an urban setting,"<sup>7</sup> more strongly felt than in *Millennium Mambo*, which seems a culmination of his earlier attempts to capture the color, noise and motion of Taiwanese youth in the city. From the very first images of the film, Hou's vision of Taipei feels dizzying and unanchored: the camera weaves slowly—drifts, really—through what appears to be a covered pedestrian overpass at night, eerily illuminated with bluish florescent lights from above and streaks of red and white light from the cars passing below. The lights appear as abstractions of color that seem to float in and out of view. While the camera angle is skewed and the focus blurred, we eventually begin to recognize that the camera is following Vicky as she moves down the walkway in slow-motion, her arms extended and her long hair swinging behind her. (Fig. 5) As the throbbing beat of techno music rises on the soundtrack, Vicky's voice-over narration begins to tell, in the third-person, the story of her self from ten years past: "It was like she was in a trance, hypnotized"—a bit

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<sup>7</sup> Ban Wang, "Black Holes of Globalization: Critique of the New Millennium in Taiwan Cinema," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 15.1 (Spring 2003): 109.

of temporal narrative disjunction that matches the disorienting visuals of the scene.



Fig. 5

Vicky's story, it turns out, has a lot in common with Liang's. She too is (or was, as the film is narrated from a point ten years past the turn of the millennium) trapped in a cyclical dead-end relationship with a boyfriend, Hao-hao, who is an urban slacker and petty thief not unlike the young hooligans with whom Liang, and even Hsiao-yang, wasted away their time. Their relationship does not appear to be based on any real emotional connection. After all, Hao-hao has sabotaged Vicky's chance for an education, has lied to her, stolen from her, and even roughed her up—yet she keeps coming back to him again and again. Rather, theirs is a relationship fueled by boredom and the need for visceral thrills and constant distraction—meandering nighttime drives

around town, bouts of utterly passionless sex, and endless hours in bars and noisy dance clubs. Even the messy apartment Vicky shares with Hao-hao seems more like an extension of the night spots they frequent than a home. Not only is it decorated with crystal beads, strobe lights and all sorts of club paraphernalia, all they do there is drink, indulge in drugs, and bounce around the room to the incessant and hypnotic pulsing of Hao-hao's club music. In fact, he has a complete DJ set-up installed in the apartment so, even when he and Vicky are in the apartment together, he puts on his headphones, spins his tunes, and completely shuts himself off from her. To further underscore the interchangeable anonymity of the urban spaces through which Vicky moves, the cramped apartment is photographed in the same way as the clubs and bars—using odd angles, tight close-ups, hazy focus and unpredictable camera movement to suggest the characters' restlessness and emotional disorientation.

Vicky's life might be seen as the bleakest story of Taiwanese urban youth and *Millennium Mambo* Hou Hsiao-Hsien's darkest vision of Taipei—if not for the few moments in the film that offer, enticingly, the possibility of redemption for Vicky. One night, in the bar where she works as a hostess, Vicky meets Jack, an older man with gangster connections, who takes her under his wing. Whether their relationship is platonic or sexual is never made explicit and, in any case, doesn't really matter. What matters is that Jack's friendship gives Vicky the perspective and courage to finally extricate herself from the downward

spiral of her relationship with Hao-hao. When she leaves him at last—after he has cut up all her clothes in a childish fit of anger—she seeks refuge with Jack, who gently takes her into his home and cooks her a warm bowl of noodles—a particularly quiet and tender moment in a film which, up to that point, had been full of sound and fury. Vicky also finds connection with a pair of half-Japanese, half-Taiwanese brothers whom she meets at a club. In the middle of the film, she travels with one of the brothers, Takeuchi Jun, to the small village in Hokkaido where he grew up and where his grandmother still runs a small inn. Yubari (夕張) is an old mining town that has been turned into a tourist site for fans of film history. The scenes in the village feature images of old movie posters, both Japanese and Western—suggesting an appreciation for the value of historical reflection—and of the kindly grandmother serving hot, nourishing bowls of *oden* to guests—offering a sense of emotional connection to family and community not found in the film’s urban scenes. There is a sense of rootedness and stability in the village scenes that are in stark contrast to the isolating and disorienting experience of Taipei. The whole sequence in rural Japan offers an idyllic interlude symbolized by the cleansing, calming snow that gently falls, and by the natural sound of Vicky’s laughter, which we hear for the first and only time. Yubari reappears towards the end of *Millenium Mambo*, when Vicky travels again to Japan, where Jack has summoned her. Arriving in Tokyo, she finds that it is as crowded and noisy as Taipei, and that Jack is nowhere to be found. The film ends,

however, not with Vicky standing alone in the streets of Tokyo, but with a flashback to her time in Yubari, where a sense of connection to place and to history gave her a chance, however slim, at finding redemption. (Fig. 6)



Fig. 6

### *Café Lumière*

The small spark of hope glimpsed at the end of *Millennium Mambo* glows even brighter in Hou's 2004 film, *Café Lumière*—a serenely beautiful portrait of a solitary young woman, Yoko, finding her way in the urban landscape of a modern metropolis—not contemporary Taipei this time, but 21st-century Tokyo. The film was commissioned by Japan's Shojiku Studios as part of a larger film tribute to mark the centenary of Yasujiro Ozu—the celebrated Japanese director to whom Hou has so often been compared. Hou has traveled

many times to Japan, where he has long had an ardent fan base, and has considerable experience collaborating with people in the Japanese film industry, including Shochiku Studios. Nevertheless, in *Métro Lumière*, a French documentary about the making of *Café*, Hou discusses the pressures he felt after accepting the commission. He acknowledges the challenges of cross-border filmmaking, but downplays the sociocultural differences between the two island-nations, emphasizing the enduring strength of the historical ties between Taiwan and Japan. He also underscores the depth of his own understanding of Japanese culture, citing not only his numerous visits to Japan, but also his voluminous research into Japanese colonial rule in Taiwan and his steady diet of Japanese novels and movies while growing up. Despite Japan's retreat from the island in 1947, Hou rightly argues, Japanese cultural influence in Taiwan has always remained strong and penetrates every aspect of Taiwanese society—architecture, language, arts, even the habits of everyday life. To illustrate this idea that the two nations and their capital cities are inextricably bound, the documentary pairs Hou's words with images that alternate between scenes of contemporary Taipei street life and similar urban scenes of Tokyo taken from *Café Lumière*.

Of greater concern to Hou were the artistic expectations he felt had been thrust upon him: Would his tribute film have to achieve a certain kind of “Japaneseness”? Would it have to be “Ozu-like”? Hou allows that his own films share certain thematic concerns and aesthetic



sensibilities with Ozu's work but insists that his "Tokyo Story" could never be mistaken for Ozu's *Tokyo Story*. To begin with, their working methods are worlds apart. Ozu worked within a rigid and tightly-organized big studio system with a regular stable of actors and actresses. His shooting scripts were filled with precise narrative and technical details and were meticulously planned, down to the exact amount of footage to be used for each scene. Hou, on the other hand, favors a more improvisational way of filming. Rather than plan each camera movement and every bit of dialogue in advance, he likes to put his performers (often non-actors) into a location, give them general guidelines about the situation, then allow their interactions to dictate the direction of the camera and the narrative. It is an observational style of filmmaking that is, says Hou, naturalistic, responsive to change, and hence more reflective of the unpredictability and complexities of modern life.

An even more important difference, Hou notes, is the fifty-year time span that separates Ozu's portraits of Tokyo from his own. Most of Ozu's celebrated domestic dramas were set in the immediate post-WWII years, a period of uncertainty and instability when Japan was trying to industrialize and rebuild itself as an economic rather than military power. Traditional social orders were being undermined by not only the shock and humiliation of the nation's military defeat, but also the upheavals brought about by the growth of cities and the lifestyle changes that accompany rapid urbanization. Ozu's post-war films,

therefore, were colored by a layer of despair and anxiety over the alienating effects of urban culture and the subsequent fraying of familial relationships. Today's Japan, argues Hou, is completely different from Ozu's time—secure in its position as an economic force, thoroughly urbanized and comfortably integrated into the global community. Moreover, the shifts in traditional social structures that caused so much distress in Ozu's era have already become commonplace. Hence, the generational conflicts and changing gender expectations that were so troubling in the 1950s seem, fifty-years later, far less problematic. As Hou pointedly remarks, “young women today have so many more options and have the ability not only to survive on their own, but even to flourish.”<sup>8</sup> This makes the question of marriage—once a woman's only path to economic security and the frequent focus of dramatic tension in Ozu's films—practically a non-issue. In *Café Lumière*, Yoko herself briefly alludes to marriage, but not as a subject for family discussion. She mentions it in the context of an unexpected pregnancy—only to matter-of-factly dismiss the idea altogether. Independent, confident and accountable to no one but herself, Yoko is very different from an Ozu heroine. She is a thoroughly modern young woman, comfortable living life on her own terms.

The film that Hou wanted to make, therefore, was a “Tokyo Story” that would be true to real life in 21st-century Tokyo. He would pay homage to Ozu not by imitating the Japanese master's work, but by

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<sup>8</sup> *Métro Lumière*, 2004.

striving to capture the sights and sounds, the flavors and textures of *contemporary* urban experience—just as Ozu did in his own day. Some fundamental aspects of urban life remain the same, of course, so *Café Lumière* opens with images of the city that will be instantly familiar to anyone who is an Ozu fan: a train passing by, a row of street lights, telephone wires cutting across the frame. (Fig. 7) When Yoko is first introduced, she is doing what innumerable female characters in Ozu films do: hanging up her laundry in her cramped apartment in the city. From the off-screen conversation she has with her neighbor, however, we learn that, unlike many of Ozu's women, Yoko's life sphere is not limited to domestic spaces; in fact, she has just returned from one of her frequent trips to Taiwan, where she has been doing research on a Taiwanese composer named Jiang Wen-ye (江文也, 1910-83) while also teaching Japanese to Taiwanese businessmen. One of those students, it is soon revealed, has become her lover and she is now carrying his child—a half-Taiwanese, half-Japanese baby who brings to mind the mixed-blood brothers whom Vicky befriends and whose home village in Hokkaido she visits. The child's existence is yet another affirmation of the strong bonds between Taiwan and Japan.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting that Jiang, the Taiwan-born musician who is the subject of Yoko's research, also moved between the two islands and married a Japanese woman. Yo Hitoto, the young singer Hou found to play Yoko, is also the product of a marriage between a Taiwanese man and a Japanese woman—a biographical tidbit that is interesting if not necessarily meaningful.



Fig. 7

At first glance, the Tokyo that Yoko inhabits shares many characteristics with the dystopic Taipei depicted in earlier New Cinema films. In some respects, the city remains a place of physical isolation and emotional estrangement where people have difficulty communicating with one another. Characters are often pictured in small, darkened interior spaces such as Yoko's apartment, coffee shops, or the narrow aisles of a bookshop, their faces and expressions barely visible. Conversations are few, and are frequently off-screen or shown in long-shot, denying us a sense of immediate human contact. Some of the longest conversations between people occur over the phone—human connections once again mediated by technology.

Even when characters are pictured together in the same frame, they say very little and often do not make eye contact. For example, when Yoko goes home to visit her father and stepmother, the distance

between them is evident from the moment her father meets her at the train station. Her father stands stiffly next to his parked car in the foreground as Yoko is seen in the distance walking slowly and silently towards him. They exchange very few words as they disappear into the car and drive away, not much beyond the standard greetings “*tadaima*” (“I’m home”) and “*okaeri*” (“welcome back”). Back at the house, Yoko and her father sit together at a low table, but are adjacent to each other so are not making any eye contact. In any case, they have little to say. Her stepmother is in a separate room altogether, and can barely be seen as she works quietly in the background, chopping steadily as she prepares dinner in the kitchen. When Yoko finally drops her bombshell news—that she is pregnant—she does so in the middle of the night, when she has gotten out of bed and wandered into the kitchen in search of something to eat. Her stepmother is up too and warms a bowl of rice for Yoko, then sits down at the table with her and watches quietly as she eats. After a very long silence, Yoko, whose back is to the camera, simply states: “I’m pregnant.” (Fig. 8) The stepmother, whose face is visible but slightly obscured by the darkness of the room, barely registers any emotion in reaction to the news. “Whose?” she asks calmly, and Yoko answers in a casual, subdued tone, “My Taiwanese boyfriend’s.” Yoko goes on to state matter-of-factly that she has no intention of marrying the father and will raise the child on her own. Having unburdened herself of this information, Yoko simply resumes eating her rice while her stepmother continues to watch in silence.



Fig. 8

Later, when the parents have an opportunity to discuss Yoko's dilemma privately, the scene is shot in a similarly detached and emotionally-opaque manner. Once again, the stationary camera observes the characters from a distance, so that their facial expressions are indecipherable. Yoko's father and stepmother are seated next to each other at a low table, but they are looking in opposite directions, without so much as a glance towards each other throughout the scene. The "discussion" about Yoko really isn't much of one because the father remains stubbornly silent from start to finish. He looks out the window, he stands up, sits down again, puts his hands in his pockets, stares out the door—but does not respond in any way to the words of the stepmother, who is alternately worrying aloud about Yoko ("Does the boyfriend have a job?" "Yoko has no savings.") and admonishing her husband: "You have to talk to Yoko!"

A third opportunity for family dialogue arises when the parents come to Tokyo to attend the funeral of a former employer and stop by to visit Yoko in her tiny apartment. The stepmother has brought a pot of Yoko's favorite beef stew and, as the family sits around the table eating, the atmosphere is awkwardly quiet. As the meal progresses, though, the tension and estrangement that underlay previous family scenes begins, ever so slightly, to dissipate. Yoko remarks that the stew is delicious, and her father, without saying a word, uses his chopsticks to move a potato from his bowl to hers. It is a tiny, almost invisible gesture, but infuses the scene with a tenderness and humanity that was missing before that moment. At a later meal in the apartment, the stepmother asks Yoko gentle questions about her pregnancy—how far along? been to a doctor? Yoko responds that she is three months pregnant and that she has indeed been to a clinic. She asks her parents to “please, don't worry,” then, surprisingly, goes on to volunteer details about her boyfriend: he was one of her students in Taiwan and works in the family business making umbrellas. She doesn't want to marry him partly because it would require her help out with the family's factories in Thailand and China, but mostly because he's “too close to his mother.” Yoko's tone remains calm and her parents are subdued, mainly listening quietly as Yoko shares her thoughts. Although they say very little, it is apparent that they are listening attentively—hints of an emotional connection that feels genuine.

Yoko's friendship with Hajime, the owner of a small bookshop, is similarly defined by fleeting but meaningful instances of tenderness. Although quiet and too shy to articulate his feelings for her, Hajime is a steadfast presence in Yoko's life. At the very beginning of the film, Yoko calls Hajime to let him know she has returned from Taiwan. The phone call, which in so many earlier films has been a symbol of technological mediation and urban alienation, is here instead a moment of human connection and intimacy, as Yoko shares with Hajime the dream that has been haunting her: about a mother who discovers that her infant has been spirited away and replaced by a baby made of ice, which is gradually melting away. When she goes to visit him at his bookstore soon after, it is clear he has been thinking about what she has shared with him because he tells her the dream is a European "changeling" story and promises to find the book for her. As they listen together to music by the composer Jiang, Yoko offers Hajime the present she has brought him from Taiwan: a watch celebrating the 116th anniversary of the founding of Taiwan's railways. The gift is small, but touchingly personal—for Hajime is a lover of trains who spends much of his spare time riding them around Tokyo and recording their sounds. Later, after Yoko has been holed up in her tiny apartment for several days because of illness, it is Hajime who calls to check on her, and who later comes over to cook her a bowl of noodles—an echo of the night Jack takes Vicky in and offers her nourishment. It is also during this visit that he shares with her that which is closest to his



heart—the digital artwork that he has created from his train research. As Yoko and Hajime lean in together around the glowing computer screen to admire the “womb of trains” Hajime has created for himself, the camera also moves closer to capture the intimacy and warmth of the moment. (Fig. 9)



Fig. 9

## De-mapping Tokyo

Like Vicky and the city-dwelling young women preceding her in Hou’s films, Yoko might also be described as a “drifter” who is in constant motion. Yoko spends much of her time traversing Tokyo by train and on foot. *Café Lumière* is filled with beautifully-composed shots of the young woman riding on trains and tramcars—often standing alone and looking out the window as the urban landscape

rushes by. We see her making her way through crowded stations and crossing platforms as she gets on and off of trains. The camera also frequently follows behind Yoko as she walks along the streets—sometimes keeping up with her rapid pace, sometimes losing track of her in the crowds or behind buildings. By tracing Yoko's steps through Tokyo, the film offers a visceral sense of the hustle and bustle of the streets, the rhythms of an urban commuter's life, as well as the essential solitude of her journey. While Vicky's movements through Taipei take place in the disorienting darkness of night, Yoko travels by day, and the images of Tokyo are often bright and sunny... luminous even. (Fig. 10) This visual contrast may seem simple and fundamental, but it gives Yoko's wanderings a clarity and comprehensibility that are a notable departure from the earlier films. Moreover, despite her constant movement, Yoko does not appear anxious or restless, and in fact has a number of emotional anchors in her life—her parents, her neighbors, her friendship with Hajime. Also, unlike Vicky, who aimlessly and desperately circles the streets of Taipei to fill her time and the hole in her soul, Yoko travels through the city with a sense of purpose; she is on a historical quest, searching for the places in Tokyo that Jiang Wenye frequented and hoping to talk to people whose lives he touched during his years in Japan. Every train that she rides and every step that she takes is actually leading her somewhere, towards something.



Fig. 10

Hence, Yoko's forays in the city have little of the melancholic yearning and frustration that characterized earlier filmic depictions of young people wandering through the urban jumble of the postmodern Asian metropolis—whether the intrusive stalking of the photographer in *The Terrorizer*, Vicky's bored meanderings through Taipei, or the labyrinthine wanderings through Hong Kong of the four young people in Wong Kar-wai's 1994 film, *Chungking Express*. I mention Wong's film here because its dark vision of urban life has something in common with the phantasmagoric depiction of Taipei in *Millennium Mambo*, and particularly because the attitude of its characters towards the physical space of the city provides an informative contrast to Yoko's approach to Tokyo. In his 1997 study of Hong Kong, Ackbar

Abbas described the city as a “space of disappearance.”<sup>10</sup> and identified several global and local socioeconomic phenomena—rising real estate prices, property speculation, and the influx of multinational corporations vying for prime commercial real estate and consumer spaces—as key forces that rendered much of the city no longer recognizable to its inhabitants. It is this sense of the city as unstable, unknowable and in continual transformation that causes all four of the “walkers” in the film—Cop 223, Cop 663, The Blonde, and Faye—to experience contemporary Hong Kong as distressingly congested, disorienting and unfamiliar. The source of their frustration and melancholy is their desire to “map out a legible city for themselves”<sup>11</sup> and search for familiar forms of intimacy and connection. In other words, they are desperately yearning for the kind of wholly-comprehensible, homogeneous community that has already disappeared—that nostalgic desire for that which is already lost, what Walter Benjamin associated with the Baudelairean flâneur for whom “the delight . . . is love—not at first sight but at last sight.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997), p. 63, p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> Tsung-yi Huang, “Chungking Express: Walking with a Map of Desire in the Mirage of the Global City,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 18.2 (Fall 2001): 114.

<sup>12</sup> Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), p. 169.

Yoko, by contrast, takes a different attitude towards the city and its relation to the past. Although she is on a historical quest of sorts, there is little suggestion that her research into Jiang's time in Tokyo is necessarily driven by a desire to reconstruct some kind of coherent narrative about his life (a biography) or about Tokyo's history. She is merely inquisitive about Jiang's life in 1930s Tokyo and takes pleasure in the moments when she is able to touch a part of the past—such as the happy afternoon she shares with Jiang's Japanese widow, looking through old photographs and listening to the older woman's anecdotes about a marriage she remembers as warm and tender. (Fig. 11) Again, Hou's camera moves in to capture the human connection as the two women gently turn the pages of the old picture album together. At the same time, Yoko also doesn't seem particularly frustrated or disappointed when her inquiries into the past don't quite pan out. One day, for instance, she locates a bookstore where Jiang was said to have been a regular customer. Not only does the bookstore owner not recall his father ever mentioning Jiang's patronage at the store, he doesn't even know who Jiang is. Yoko is unperturbed; she thanks him politely and moves on. Similarly, on another day Yoko enlists Hajime's help to find Club Dat, an old jazz café that was said to be Jiang's favorite. When they arrive in the area of the Ginza where the club was said to have been, of course there is no trace, as the transformations of urbanization have replaced it with a generic-looking high-rise of concrete and glass. Even though the spot has been rendered

unrecognizable, Yoko does not appear to be at a loss. She simply photographs the site and continues on her way, seemingly content just to document the physical changes in the urban landscape.



Fig. 11

Yoko's approach to the past brings to mind an article, by Jordan Sand, describing "Street Observation Science," an urban movement that arose in Tokyo during the 1980s in response to the rapid and radical transformation of Tokyo by the very same socioeconomic forces—rising real estate prices, property speculation, the influx of multinational corporations and their global consumer products—that Abbas holds responsible for rendering Hong Kong into a "space of disappearance." It was this climate of rampant speculation, redevelopment and urban transformation, Sands notes, that fueled a sudden interest among

Japanese in the city's past.<sup>13</sup> There was an efflorescence of writing by academics and journalists alike about the city, much of rooted in walking and street-level investigations of Tokyo's disappearing old neighborhoods. Most of these efforts, argues Sand, adopted the nostalgic sensibilities of a historical preservationist—seeking to find, preserve, and fit together traces of Tokyo's past into a comprehensible whole.<sup>14</sup> Like these movements, the practitioners of Street Observation Science were interested in photographing and documenting old and new ephemera in the urban landscape. However, unlike those who sought to trace a clear historical narrative line between past and present, they had no interest in mapping these fragments into something recognizable and useful. As Sands explains it, even though “the fragments they collected spoke of a vanishing past . . . the street observationists never pointed toward a specific place or time as the lost home of their nostalgic longing.”<sup>15</sup> Instead, he argues, they approached these collected fragments with a joyful spirit and “the sensibility of childhood play,” taking pleasure in the random juxtaposition of the old and new. This playful attitude offered, Sand suggests, a form of redemption: “. . . a technique for reanimating a physical world rendered inanimate by

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<sup>13</sup> Jordan Sand, “Street Observation Science and the Tokyo Economic Bubble, 1986-1990,” *The Spaces of the Modern City: Imaginaries, Politics and Everyday Life*, ed. Gran Prakash and Kevin M. Krause (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP), p. 378.

<sup>14</sup> Sand, “Street Observation Science and the Tokyo Economic Bubble, 1986-1990,” *The Spaces of the Modern City*, p. 374.

<sup>15</sup> Sand, “Street Observation Science and the Tokyo Economic Bubble, 1986-1990,” *The Spaces of the Modern City*, p. 387.

adulthood . . . a weapon against the increasing alienation of urban form from our bodily awareness.”<sup>16</sup>

Yoko’s attitude towards the past, as she wanders through Tokyo and collects pieces of Jiang Wen-ye’s past, seems very much in this spirit. Even though she may never understand the totality of Jiang’s life or his place in Tokyo’s historical landscape, the historical awareness that comes with each fragment she collects and appreciates connects her a bit more securely to the city and gives her life. This notion of recovering a childlike perception of the environment and reanimating one’s relationship to it seems an even more apt description of Hajime and his train project. The train—noisy, fast, mechanical—has always been an important symbol of modernity and city life. Beginning from the time of the Lumiere brothers (*Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat*, 1895), Dziga Vertov (*Man With A Movie Camera*, 1929) and Walther Ruttmann (*Berlin, Symphony of a City*, 1927), it has also enjoyed a special relationship with cinema. Yasujiro Ozu was fascinated by trains, seeing them as vehicles of both mystery and change.<sup>17</sup> As Japan modernized, trains were the means by which small towns were connected to the big city and the new, unfamiliar opportunities presented there. They were also the vehicles that separated families as patterns of life began to change and the younger generation migrated to the cities. Almost all of

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<sup>16</sup> Sand, “Street Observation Science and the Tokyo Economic Bubble, 1986-1990,” *The Spaces of the Modern City*, p. 386.

<sup>17</sup> Donald Richie, *Ozu* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1977), p. 14.



Ozu's movies contain train scenes, and more than a few open and close with sequences occurring either on or near a train. The same can be said of most of Hou's films set in Taiwan, the development of the train system (started by the Japanese, incidentally) having been crucial to the island's modernization. Hou is equally cognizant of the centrality of JNR's vast train and tramcar system to the realities of contemporary Japan. Hence, when Hou opens and closes *Café Lumière* with images of trains coming and going, it is not merely an homage to Ozu, it is an acknowledgement of the centrality of trains in the urban experience. The capital city's trains are such an integral part of how Tokyoites experience the city in everyday life that Hou studied the Tokyo train map before beginning filming in order to determine which train lines and which stations his characters might travel through on their daily wanderings.<sup>18</sup> His goal was not so much to map out a narrative direction for the story (he thought of the constellation of stations as "a set of coordinates" by which he might begin to understand the city), but to go to each of the locations and experience their sights and sounds at street level—better to capture the specific texture and unique energy of each place and, most importantly, to maintain a "continual sense of discovery."<sup>19</sup> Hajime's approach to his railroad project is, in many ways, similar. Intent on collecting different sounds on every line of the Tokyo

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<sup>18</sup> *Métro Lumière*. Hou jokingly mentions that trains are so central to his film that he briefly considered calling it *Métro Lumière* (actually, *dian che shi guang* / 電車時光).

<sup>19</sup> *Métro Lumière*.

railway system, Hajime rides the trains daily and knows the names and specific sounds of every station in the city. He isn't really interested in understanding how all the pieces he has collected fit together or to reconstruct the network as a whole. When Yoko asks him if he is "trying to find the essence of the railways," he shrugs and says he is not, because "the sounds are different every time . . . that's what makes it interesting." Instead, he uses the fragmentary sounds that he has collected to create his own digital artwork—to play with them, as it were. In a magical scene, Hajime shares his artwork with Yoko: a child, wearing headphones and holding a microphone ("It's me," explains Hajime) is encircled by a "womb" of train cars of all different sizes and colors.<sup>20</sup> As Yoko plays with the keys on Hajime's computer, the trains move, change color and size—the mysterious, mechanical symbols of urban modernity literally animated by the spirit of child's play. It is also worth noting that, unlike in Edward Yang's *The Terrorizer*, technology here is neither menacing nor alienating, but instead a tool for exploration and creative connection.

The train motif also plays a key role in tracing the developing relationship between Yoko and Hajime. The two young urbanites are clearly connected to each other by trains, as the longest train and tramcar sequences in the film depict Yoko traveling either to or from a

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<sup>20</sup> Much of *Café Lumière* was filmed on Tokyo's Yamanote line—the circular route that "surrounds" the heart of the city just as the train cars in Hajime's artwork encircle child.

meeting with Hajime. Early in the film, the emphasis is on the insularity of train cars as Yoko and Hajime experience a couple of “missed connections.” Once, Yoko is on her way to meet him but misses a train because of a sudden bout of morning sickness—a reminder of the “punctuality, calculability, exactness” of the “impersonal time schedule” imposed upon life in the big city.<sup>21</sup> In another memorable sequence, Yoko has been looking in vain for Hajime and learns that he is out recording train sounds. Unable to reach him by phone, she continues her travels around town—walking along busy streets, crossing a pedestrian bridge, riding the trains. In what is perhaps the most gorgeous image of the entire movie, Yoko is standing in a moving train, gazing dreamily into the foreground towards the camera. Suddenly, in the background, another train traveling on a separate track appears, and Hajime can be seen standing near the door, looking out the window towards Yoko’s train. The tension builds as the two trains travel parallel to one another: will he notice her through the window? Will she turn her head and see him? As the trains slowly move apart, both young people remain absorbed in their own thoughts and do not see each other.

*Café Lumière* comes to a lovely conclusion with a delicate sequence which both echoes and resolves these previous scenes of “missed connections.” Yoko is pictured sitting aboard a train car, her

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<sup>21</sup> Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, p. 32.

head resting on her shoulder because she has fallen asleep. At a stop, the train doors open and Hajime, with his headphones on and his microphone raised, boards the train. He spots Yoko but does not wake her. Instead, he stands in front of her, quiet and sweetly protective. He continues to focus on his recording, but there is a trace of a smile on his lips as he watches Yoko until she awakens. Without exchanging a word, they get off the train together at the next station and, as Hajime walks down the platform to record more sounds, Yoko silently decides to join him, following at a distance. The penultimate image of the film shows the couple standing on the platform as a train passes in front of them. (Fig. 12) They are standing some distance apart and are not really looking at each other, but their aura of contentment and serenity tells us that they are definitely together, connected by the hypnotic sounds and sights of the trains passing. Hou ends his film with an image that has recurred throughout the film and which underscores his idea that the trains are the pulse and lifeblood of the city: on the right of the screen, a train moves along the track towards a bridge that will carry it across the river which, on the left of the screen, flows slowly and evenly, unperturbed by the activity of the city round it. (Fig. 13) As the image fades out, the clickety-clack of the train echoes like a heartbeat—steady, familiar and reassuring.



Fig. 12



Fig. 13

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The brighter visual palette and lighter tone of *Café Lumière* suggest that Hou Hsiao-Hsien's perspective of city life has shifted dramatically from the visions of Taipei in his earlier films. With the passage of time, the modernist anxiety over fragmentation and the impulse to bring order and rationality into chaos have lost their traction. Unlike the older generation of characters in Ozu's domestic dramas, for whom the upheavals wrought by urbanization were still fresh, Hou's post-modern nomads no longer feel nostalgic melancholy over the dissolution of traditional familial structures. Unlike Edward Yang's city people or even the urban dwellers in Hou's own earlier films, Yoko and Hajime are not undone by the physical isolation and emotional uncertainties of city life. They are comfortable with ambiguity and instability, and are willing to embrace new, mutable forms of community. Wandering the streets of contemporary Tokyo—sometimes together, sometimes alone—Yoko and Hajime demonstrate that even in the cold anonymity of the postmodern metropolis, the kindness of humanity can be found. They have no need for a coherent map of Tokyo or a complete understanding of history. They are enriched by merely coming into contact with the past and future, even in fragments. Yoko and Hajime find contentment amid the chaos and randomness of

urban life, and take pleasure in the unpredictable and fleeting moments of connection—to the past, to others—whenever and wherever they occur.

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