亞洲極簡主義的詩學:
小津安二郎、侯孝賢、是枝裕和電影的長鏡遠景美學

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摘要

這篇論文試圖為長鏡頭（Long take）和遠景鏡頭（Long shot）在東亞電影的呈現尋找另一種註解。日本大師小津安二郎（Ozu Yasujiro）與台灣導演侯孝賢（Hou Hsiao-Hsien）以遠距離的攝影機架設，疏離觀察的拍攝風格，以及省略性的敘述方式（elliptical narrative），影響了一些亞洲年輕世代的電影工作者。這些新世代的導演將小津與侯孝賢的鏡頭風格做了一些微妙的變化，用以呈現他們對於現代亞洲社會文化的觀察。竄升於90年代的新銳，如日本的是枝裕和（Koreeda Hirokazu），擅長以長鏡拍攝電影，自承或多或少受到侯孝賢與小津的影響。這篇論文以小津與侯孝賢的電影風格作為前提，連結是枝裕和的作品，重新思考長鏡頭和遠景鏡頭於東亞電影的意涵。

侯孝賢建立了長鏡與遠景鏡頭的表現內涵，使其帶有濃厚的亞洲色彩，David Bordwell 稱之為「亞洲極簡主義」（Asian Minimalism）。對於亞洲電影工作者而言，長鏡的使用創造一種現實時空完整性的效果，反映人們日常生活的自然表現。因此，當代亞洲導演偏好長鏡與遠景鏡頭的使用，並不全然只是鏡頭美學的考量，似乎更是一種「生活經驗」的呈現。有鑑於西方學者在解讀亞洲電影時偏重於電影語

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言、形式技巧的著墨，甚少將歷史文化因素涵蓋於鏡頭拍攝的分析中，這篇論文提出，小津、侯孝賢與是枝裕和三位亞洲導演擅長的極簡風格，可能塑形於相似的歷史因素與相互的文化影響。換言之，長鏡與遠景鏡頭在這三位導演的電影中所呈現的不只是電影美學，而是一份文化內涵。這篇論文試圖論述三位導演對於長鏡與遠景鏡頭的使用，除了是一種拍攝風格的發展，保存了現實的時間與空間的完整性，長鏡和遠景鏡頭在他們電影的呈現，其實蘊含了東亞歷史文化經驗的記憶，豐富了影像的人文深度。

關鍵字：
長鏡頭／遠景鏡頭、亞洲極簡主義、小津安二郎、侯孝賢、是枝裕和、非人中心主義
This paper attempts to re-locate the meanings of the long take and long shot in contemporary East Asian Cinema, an aesthetic tendency that appears so prevalent in works of the past two decades. I am interested in why the aesthetics of the long take and long shot in East Asia filmmaking have been considered as a token representing East Asian filmic art, in particular in the 1990s. To attribute the reason to a stylistic emulation, it seems to me, overlooks their rich cultural meanings of certain films in terms of Asian history and philosophy. Going beyond hypothesis about western film theory, the use of the long take and long shot in East Asia is significant for the way in which it is reconfigured as a regional, socio-cultural practice that reflects cultural and historical contexts. This article discusses the stylistics of the long take and long shot in the works of Ozu Yasujiro, Hou Hsiao-hsien, and Kore-edo Hirokazu, three Asian filmmakers who generally use long take/long shot expertise and exert influence over each other’s shooting style. More than a cinematic aesthetic, I read their use of the long take and long shot as a new relation between film narrative and historical reflection, film art and cultural landscape, and thereby explore the cultural significance embodied in the shots.

**Bazin’s definition of the Long Take**

In *What is Cinema?*, André Bazin emphasised medium’s relation to reality. In particular he analysed the long take in terms of how it allows the director to develop an image without switching to another image. This uninterrupted development is what Bazin called the event’s time, which produces a temporal realism. Bazin sees the use of the long take as a

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principle of time construction, a structure of reality that builds sequences without an interruption. But his interpretation of the long take, in Brian Henderson’s opinion, seems to confine its definition. Henderson pointed out that Bazin’s theory overlooks other independent, expressive possibilities of cinematic language in order to stress the importance of the long take as a means of constructing reality. Unlike Bazin who put a special emphasis on temporal realism, Henderson sketched the possible relationships of long takes and cutting within and between sequences, regarding the long take as a shooting style that can rarely develop in its pure state but almost always appears in combination with other forms of editing.

Bazin’s idea of the long take is perhaps arguable. It opened up areas for consideration that Henderson attempted to elaborate in terms of sequence construction. That said, we do find Bazin’s account of the long take reflected in contemporary East Asian filmmaking. By the 1990s, one stream of Asian art cinema shared aesthetic features with films from other countries: I refer to the detached observation style that some filmmakers employed through their distanced and fixed camera positioning and their preference for the long take. This aesthetic laid the basis of a regional style. Asian art cinema of this period emphasised the long take. A scene is conducted by means of a few or just one shot, so as to avoid the interrupting of continuous action. Close-ups and sometimes medium shots are eschewed, in order to oblige the audience to concentrate on a complete action. In terms of plot, there are rarely any dramatic moments, as the characters tend to be more repressed than emotional, and the stories are often embedded in simple daily routines without melodramatic

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conflict. These techniques and qualities form a regional visual style that David Bordwell has called “Asian Minimalism.”

**Asian Minimalism**

Although Bordwell claimed that he was not happy with the term “Asian Minimalism,” as some qualities of it seem to have stemmed from postwar Italian Neo-realism and are reminiscent of other national cinemas, he could not come up with another term that so well encapsulated techniques common to certain Asian countries from the 1990s onwards.\(^4\)

If, as Bordwell alleged, this broad minimalism appeared in certain European filmmakers’ works in the 1960s and 1970s, such as R.W. Fassbinder and Chantal Akerman, and then again in the works of Hou Hsiao-Hsien and Taiwanese New Wave cinema in the 1980s, “Asian Minimalism” could be a slightly problematic term, since it is not exclusively Asian. Bordwell assumed that such a style was possibly influenced by European films, most likely through the festival milieu in the 1980s.\(^5\) It is still interesting to ask why the use of the long take, the elliptical narrative, and unmotivated long shots were spontaneously adopted among East Asian filmmakers, despite important differences among them. I consider this spread of visual style in East Asia has something to do with their shared cultural experiences and historical background. Countries like Taiwan, Japan, Korea and China were linked together before 1945 by their colonial past. Film scholar James Udden also argues that it is more than a coincidence that Asian filmmakers


shared this artistic tendency, which is either largely an aesthetic phenomenon or carries cultural meaning. Udden suggests that use of the long take appears part of a large, contemporary cultural phenomenon in East Asia, as modern Asian popular culture often defies rigid national boundaries, where trends and fashion move beyond them. This quick mobility of cultural influence in Asia is evidence of a pan-Asian identity in popular culture: “East Asians are now more likely to consume and borrow from each other than from the West. So this particular pan-Asian style — where the long take is coupled with a static camera — shows how this is occurring even outside of the mainstream.”

However, to attribute this particular pan-Asian style to contemporary popular cultural exchange, as Udden does, underestimates why certain Asian filmmakers have ‘persistently’ practiced this unusual shooting style. The most notable case of this filming style in Asia from the 1980s to the first decade of millennium was in the films of Taiwanese director, Hou Hsiao-Hsien. His camera shots are static and maintain a certain distance, rarely using close-ups that have dramatic force. His films make use of off-screen action and subdued climaxes. They keep a detached observational distance from his actors, carefully developing the image without the interruption of a switch to another image; all of which, he believed, renders the film more faithful to life. For Hou the use of the long shot and long take, by definition and by practice, makes a setting teem with layers of detail, which in turn produces an effect of leading the audience to an overall view. Many of Hou’s European contemporaries justified their distant long shots on pseudo-Brechtian grounds, claiming

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that distancing blocks emotion and provokes the viewer to thought. In contrast to Europeans, the impression among Asian filmmakers is that the static long take and distant long shot serve to present details and hold tension. Hou particularly wanted to capture the tension that is made possible by distance, especially in dramatic moments, when the audience, remote from the action, has an objective point of view about the characters or the event. This kind of image made possible by a fixed camera positioned far from the action became a shooting style of the 1980s Taiwan New Cinema. It put Taiwan in the world cinema arena and was often discussed. It seems that the long take and long shot, Hou’s cinematic signature, have become a Taiwanese stylistic practice that handles the shots in a different fashion from the West.

Hou’s distanced and static long take had an influence on some Asian directors in the 1990s; he set out to explore the long take as an expressive device. That became a style spreading to others’; for instance, some Taiwanese, Korean, Japanese, and Chinese films particularly have been built on the static long take and long shot. The films of Chang Cho-Chi, Tsai Ming-Liang, Hong Sangsoo, Kore-eda Hirokazu, and Jia Zhangke make evocative use of Hou’s style. These directors have developed many subtle variants of Hou’s stylistics and applied them to capture their observations of the modern Asian cultural landscape. Their shooting styles mostly revolve around long takes combined with a propensity for long shots, giving them a visualisation remarkably similar to Hou’s, which seems, as Udden has claimed, more than just a coincidence. Kore-eda in particular has openly acknowledged Hou’s influence upon him. He directed a TV documentary about Hou in 1993, which forms a link between the two directors. When Kore-eda shot his début Maboroshi

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no hikari/Maboroshi (1995), Hou offered help and advice. In the film Kore-eda’s long take/long shot method, combined with low-key lighting and elliptical story-telling, is very similar to Hou’s. Extensive use of the long take and long shot, the relative lack of camera movement, and the narrative ellipsis in Kore-eda’s early films are reminiscent of Hou’s filming style. Rather than discussing further Kore-eda’s emulation of Hou, what I am interested in exploring is the significance of use of the long take, long shot, empty shot (blank shot), and emphasis of the lyrical over the narrative — the cinematic traits that are found in Hou’s and Kore-eda’s works, and which seem to be not only an aesthetic phenomenon but also indicate a rich East Asian cultural meaning that even elaborates more the cinematic definition of this stylistic tendency.

Ozu Yasujiro, Hou Hsiao-Hsien, and Kore-eda Hirokazu

Despite Udden’s denial of Hou’s stylistic similarity with Ozu Yasujiro’s, Ozu is a necessary precedent for understanding contemporary Asian minimalist style. His late films display some of the traits found in Hou’s scenes. Although Hou claimed that he had not seen Ozu’s films before 1985, and although Ozu’s films largely depend on editing, a technique that is rarely used by Hou, Ozu’s static camera aesthetic is a stylistic that Hou separately elaborates, by prolonging and excavating the full shot. It is characteristic of Hou to place his camera far back, fixed watchfully, and then sometimes to cut to an unrelated scene — a character or a set out of narrative context. Like Ozu, Hou also has his shot switched to empty spaces without movement or character, which looks as if the narrative is disrupted and has become a detached perspective on the action, but in fact forms a narrative strategy that threads the emotional development of sequences. Kore-eda’s films are

8 Udden, “The Future of Luminescent Cloud.”

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often associated with Ozu’s. It has been pointed out that, in terms of length of shots, the average shot duration of Ozu’s in his late films is seven seconds whereas in Kore-eda’s early films it is twenty-one seconds.\(^9\) Kore-eda is closer to Hou than to Ozu, in terms of use of the long take method.\(^10\) Kore-eda’s connection with Ozu is arguably tenuous, with the exception of his later work — *Aruitemo aruitemo/Still Walking* (2008), which explicitly evokes the theme of Ozu’s post-war cinema in its depiction of family relations. Kore-eda himself seems to have disagreed with the notion that there is too much stylistic similarity between him and Ozu.\(^11\) Desser indicates that if there are more direct and obvious links between the two Japanese filmmakers, they are the structures of de-dramatisation and narrative ellipsis that Kore-eda derives from Ozu.\(^12\)

An important narrative principle for Ozu is ellipsis; he tends to elide certain dramatic moments in his films. Certain story-points are dropped or occur off-screen. Scenes of objects, always everyday objects, are used

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\(^10\) Hou’s *A City of Sadness* (1989), for example, contains two hundred and fifteen shots, with an average shot length of about forty-four seconds; in *The Puppetmaster* (1993), the number of shots is reduced to one hundred, and to fifty-seven in *Good Men, Good Women* (1994). The length of each shot increases to eighty-five seconds in *The Puppetmaster*, and is even longer in *Good Men, Good Women*.

\(^11\) I-fen Wu, “The Long Take/Long Shot Stylistic and Non-anthropocentricism — Interview with Kore-edo Hirokazu,” *Fa Film Appreciation Journal* 32 (autumn/winter 2014): 154. In the interview, instead of comparing himself with Ozu in terms of their similarity, Kore-edo pointed out noticeable differences between his and Ozu’s works, such as their interior/exterior shots, the use of light and the choice of (non) professional actors. This interview is published in Chinese.

\(^12\) Desser, “The Imagination of the Transcendent,” p. 281.
to imply an amount of elapsed time.\footnote{The objects in Ozu’s films, usually composed with long shots or long takes, serve to indicate the progress of time, as well as to contain the emotion of the characters. As examples, we can consider the vase in the darkened hotel room in \textit{Late Spring} (1949), or the flower arrangement in \textit{Equinox Flower} (1958). In the middle of \textit{Late Spring}, there is a sequence in which father and daughter take a trip to Kyoto before her impending marriage. At night in their hotel room, they chat about the good time they spent. Shortly after the light is switched off, the father falls asleep. In the dark the daughter is looking at her father. Then the shot cuts to the vase in the alcove, with the father’s snoring heard. The shot moves to the daughter, with a smile on her face, then again to the vase in another long shot. This sequence finishes with a shot of the daughter lying on tatami, no longer with a smile on her face, almost in tears. The shot of the vase in \textit{Late Spring} suggests the passing of time, and works as a form which conveys an emotional situation and, in Schrader’s explanation, “transforms the emotion into an expression of something unified, permanent, transcendent.” See Paul Schrader, \textit{Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer} (Berkeley: Da Capo, 1972), p. 51.} Kore-eda does likewise. He weds a long take style to his depiction of human experiences and emotions, complemented with the elimination of dramatic moments by switching the shots to empty spaces — interiors emptied of their occupants, deserted exteriors or landscapes in nature to produce a full-scale de-dramatisation. In this respect Kore-eda’s empty framing with long lens shooting might be indebted to Ozu and to Hou, who use empty space shots to skip over dramatic points and thus delay the movement of their film narratives to climaxes, a transitional structure that refines and even purifies the emotion between scenes.\footnote{Ellipsis is a narrative device in film editing. It is, according to the definition of \textit{The Film Studies Dictionary}, “a passage of time that is missing from the film’s action on screen, but which is implied through various cinematic means. Fades or dissolves on the screen are common ways of indicating ellipses.” See Steve Blandford, Barry Keith Grant and Jim Hiller, \textit{The Film Studies Dictionary} (London: Arnold 2001), p. 82. The ellipses in the three filmmakers’ works produce a different effect. Their use of ellipses...} Despite the fact that the shots of...
empty space (or with static objects) are generally thought to ‘interrupt’ or ‘break’ the narrative, the empty spaces inserted between scenes essentially work as transitional shots, a link that on the one hand prepares the viewers for the next scene, and on the other indicates the passage of time and the change of space.\textsuperscript{15}

Empty shots frequently have a narrative or symbolic significance. Since empty shots indicate the track of time, the change of space, and thread the emotion between scenes and sequences, it seems that narrative ellipsis and de-dramatisation are not necessarily the consequence of use of the empty shot. It is too narrow to say that switching to an empty shot and not cutting back to storytelling amounts to being elliptical or detracting from the narrative. There are other different possible meanings for using such a technique. In Ozu’s Kohayagawa-ke no aki/The End of Summer (1961), one evocative empty shot appears in Kohayagawa’s house when the old father suddenly becomes ill in the late evening and his daughter is making a phone call to send for the doctor. Ozu cuts from her telephoning to the doctor’s clinic, to the clock indicating the time on the wall, to the Kohayagawa house corridor, to the living room, and then to the doctor sitting next to the patient’s bedside. Without explaining a word about old Kohayagawa’s condition, the shot cuts back to the empty living room, to the uncle’s visit, to the street at day-break, and then to the corridor with the clock showing the time at twenty-seven past nine. The father is later seen in a state of recovery, talking to his family. This

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\textsuperscript{15} Desser, “The Imagination of the Transcendent,” pp. 281-282.
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A sequence of empty shots portrays a passage of time, from late night to early morning, and implies narrative development, despite there being no obvious drama. Ozu’s empty shots, as Geist says, “reveal the power of emptiness, of a lack of information, to suggest a multitude.”

**Traditional arts and life philosophy of East Asian culture**

Ozu built up a body of work in a Japanese context that develops pure optical and sound situations, in which the everyday banality of family life is captured by a low, fixed camera shot, and very slow camera movement. The absence of plot and the disappearance of action images in Ozu’s films, in favour of visual and sound images, constitute the essentials of his script. Ozu’s fixed shot on an empty space works as a transitional shot that indicates spatial change, to link the sequences and move the story on. Ozu’s shots of empty space owe their importance to the absence of possible content, which reveals the empty/full dichotomy of Asian thought. From early times geometrical and symmetrical designs were a tendency in Greek and Roman arts, which considered empty space without any independent function should be filled up. By contrast, Kathe Geist argues, the Taoist and Buddhist traditions of Japan and China see human beings as an element in nature; and nature, as a conceptual idea rendered impressionistically rather than exactly, contains a lot of vacant and unseen spaces that are celebrated and used as an active design

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18 Geist, “Playing with Space,” p. 284.
element which needs no filling up. So emptiness is more than a concept of ‘void’ in the East. In terms of Japanese aesthetics and Chinese philosophy, emptiness carries its own weight to indicate a sense of ‘fullness.’ This empty/full dichotomy informs much traditional art in Japan and China. Donald Richie points out that emptiness is defined in a manner that Western aesthetics hardly notice; for instance, both Chinese and Japanese paintings assert that emptiness does not exist until the first mark is drawn on paper. Richie takes flower arrangement (Ikebana) as an example, explaining that “the spaces between the stems and branches define the space as much as do the stems and the branches themselves.”

In traditional Japanese scroll painting, the bottom is full, the top empty. Empty space contributes to a composition — in the art of flower arrangement, the stems and branches are considered part of the finished work; the configuration of a landscape in a scroll painting is considered fully developed as long as it is contrasted by the empty space. The presentation of arts in the East is concerned with a full/unfilled balance, in which the meaning of the full is not achieved unless the blankness is defined. Such a full/empty dichotomy also appears in the famous empty shots of Ozu, which encourage one to contemplate what is presented as ‘vacant.’

Many critics find Ozu’s transitional shots evidence of Japanese aesthetic practices and tradition. Similar to the Japanese scroll landscape in which emptiness defines fullness, the empty shots in Ozu’s films often

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19 Geist, “Playing with Space,” p. 284.


have a narrative or symbolic significance. The static shot focused on the slippers in the Atami resort sequence in *Tokyo Monogatari / Tokyo Story* (Ozu Yasujiro, 1953) indicates the ‘full’ presence of the old couple. Sent by their children to Atami, a hot spring resort where a lot of young people stay and party over night, the old parents are disturbed by the noise and stay awake. The sequence begins with people walking around the hotel while music is heard playing, and then cuts to two pairs of slippers lying outside a room. We soon realise the slippers indicate the presence of the old couple, who, being some of the few guests not joining the crowd, cannot sleep and somewhat impatiently fan themselves on the tatami. The shots cut a few times between the couple and the hotel guests drinking and playing cards, and then back to the slippers before the sequence ends. Against the joyous atmosphere in the resort, the shot of the slippers looks incongruous between scenes of narrative action. Yet the band music in the background creates a fluidity that moves the sequence on, emphasising the sharp contrast between the old couple and the young people, the quiet and the loud. The empty shot of the slippers inserted in the rowdy resort scenes metaphorically suggests the presence of old parents in the resort, and symbolically gives meaning to the emptiness that the old couple feel during their trip to Tokyo. Frustrated by the indifferent treatment they received from their children, and by their disappointment at learning their son is no more than an ordinary doctor in Tokyo, the old couple who had expected to have a good reunion with their children, experience disillusionment; a sentiment that is cast onto the empty shot of slippers—lonely and disappointing.

The empty-full dichotomy is also found in the composition of Kore-edā’s films. His empty shots, similar to Ozu’s and Hou’s, tend to waive major dramatic moments in the film; either they are empty of characters, which suggests their presence in their absence, or the location
or purpose of these shots is ambiguous and implies a story lying beyond what the images show us. In Maboroshi the empty shot of Ikuo’s bicycle becomes a symbol that points to his absence and to Yumiko’s sense of grieving. Earlier in the film we see Yumiko and Ikuo cycle together late at night and intimately chat alongside their bicycles. After Ikuo’s death, his bike, visually indicating his absence, reminds Yumiko of their past together. Later she is seen holding the key of Ikuo’s bicycle in her palm, and then going out to ride in the streets, presumably to those places where she and Ikuo cycled to before. Turning her back to the camera, Yumiko pushes the bike along the railroad, a shot that suggests the struggle between her past memory and her current loss of Ikuo. The bicycle is metaphorically structured as a carrier of death as well as a carrier of memory. The next shot cuts from an ellipsis to focus on Ikuo’s green bicycle leaning on the wall for fifteen seconds, an empty shot that fully condenses the feeling of Yumiko’s deep sense of loss.

The framing of the father’s deserted chair in the opening sequence of Hou’s Tongnian wangshi/A Time to Live, A Time to Die (1985) also occupies a threshold between emptiness and fullness, which implies the family’s memory of their father. The remembrance of his father sitting in front of his desk working on papers is Ah-ha’s deepest memory of him. The chair in his study thus becomes a symbol of his physical absence and of Ah-ha’s memory of him. Hou also uses empty space as a positive compositional element to invite the audience to read meaning into it. In the second half of A Time to Live, A Time to Die, when the mother takes a pedicab to the local hospital, the shot of the slowly moving pedicab in the background is focused. The camera shot remains even after the pedicab has disappeared from the screen, leaving only the desolate road in the rain, as if to suggest that the mother will never come back. She passes away that night. At the end of the film, Hou again inserts an empty shot to

imply the grandmother’s death, by framing the empty stool beside the tea table where she used to sit. The camera cuts back to the tatami on which the grandmother stiffly lies, while the details of her death are narrated. In Hou’s films, the empty shot often stimulates the viewer’s understanding of the scene, which appears static but contains implicit meaning.

Avoiding the use of continuity in narrative and fast-paced montage, Hou proceeds by means of extremely long takes and deep focus to compose the rhythm of his films. Hou’s static shot with detached distance reflects the traditional idea in Chinese scroll painting — not for a realistic rendering, but a delineation of an idea; a kind of abstract realism that represents a meaning that transcends form. In his article on visual representation of Chinese painting and cinema, Dazheng Hao says that “Chinese painting did not portray reality; the world that the viewer entered was the realm of literature or philosophy, a realm which transcended nature.”

Traditional Chinese landscape (scroll) painting, generally employing multiple perspectives, strives for a timeless, communal impression and thus requires a viewing distance to feel its sense of infinity and to perceive its representational intention. The use of multiple perspectives in Chinese painting creates a laid-out spatial image, allowing the viewer to have an expansive, horizontal vision in a zoom-out like movement, instead of concentrating on a narrow focus as the Western painting usually demands. Hou’s camera movement resembles ideas similar to Chinese scroll painting: static camera and unchanging focus can lead to elastic framing and multiple perspectives, like a lateral track.

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from right to left, the same way one would unravel a handscroll and watch its scene unfold. Udden also points out that Hou frequently sticks to a long take that allows a large number of incidental characters to move freely about, even in between the camera and the main characters. An example of Hou’s visual sieve-like composition is the sequence of the Lin family dinner at the end of *Beijing chengshi/A City of Sadness* (1989), in which the elderly grandfather and a few family members are eating at a table, while women, coming and going, are busy feeding their young children. In this eating scene, two women in the centre of the frame turn their backs to the camera, fetching food for the children. Then a young boy, with his back facing the camera also replaces the two women standing in the middle waiting for food. At the same time, people dine in the other room behind where the grandfather sits, and two come to the grandfather’s table to get food. Initially it is difficult to notice people in the other room. They are deep in the shot and often obscured by people moving around in the main dining room. Gradually we recognise who these people are, and understand that men and women have to eat at different tables in that era. From the beginning of this shot, Hou does not move his camera, and, as if recording, he holds his shot watchfully to catch all movements, even though some incidental movement blocks or blurs the focus of the shot. His camera shot is able to retain every detail within the frame, yet still preserves the spatial and temporal continuity inherent in the long take. In Hou’s film, the seemingly unforced, natural and unplanned movements characterise the shot’s Chinese-painting-like quality, designating the frame as a scroll painting suffused with spontaneous emotion and lively gestures.

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Similarly, many Japanese art forms exert influence upon Japanese cinema. In his article on Japanese cinema and the traditional arts, Tadao Sato raises a discussion of Japanese paintings, pointing out some aspects that Japanese cinema shares with the emaki tradition: “in emaki, close-ups, montages, and a variety of points of view do not exist, nor is there any division between scenes.”25 The simplicity of emaki painting calls to mind the canonical characteristics of Kore-eda’s early films, in which the static long shots with no close-ups, the decrease in the use of camera movement, and the composition of images coupled with natural and seasonal references, all establish the filmmaker’s style. Filmed with a static camera in a long take, Kore-eda’s shot of empty spaces echoes the Japanese painting aesthetic full of natural subjects and rich in seasonal images. His long takes and static camera views of the natural world present a portrait structured around narration of the seasonal cycle, which in a way shares Ozu’s emphasis on cyclic and seasonal time; moving on as in a cycle of life, death, and rebirth.26

25 Tadao Sato, “Japanese Cinema and the Traditional Arts: Imagery, Technique, and Cultural Context.” Cinematic Landscape: Observations on the Visual Arts and Cinema of China and Japan, eds. Linda. C. Ehrlich and David Desser (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), p. 170. Emaki is Japanese scroll painting that opens horizontally. It is designed to be viewed in sequence when unrolled from right to left, which allows the story gradually to unfold through a succession of scenes like a film strip. The focus on the seasons in emaki derives from the painting style called Yamato-e (literary meaning, Japanese painting), a genre of painting that was popular from around the tenth century, Heian period (794-1185). Rich in seasonal subjects, Yamato-e’s preferred subjects were scenes from literary classics, the four seasons, famous places, festivals and ceremonies. Seasonal subjects became the mainstream of art at that time. Along with nature, they were a major focus of Yamato-e.

Indicating the passage of time, the seasonal cycle suggests the Buddhist notion of a life-death-rebirth sequence, which is inevitable and too transient to grasp. Death is not considered the ending but the beginning; not unlike winter, followed by spring, that invokes the joy of new life. In *Tokyo Story*, Ozu inserts shots of Onomichi at dawn when the mother (Tomi) passes away in the morning. The shots focus on the empty pier, the empty sidewalk, the empty train tracks, and then move to Tomi lying dead on the bed. These void images in Onomichi resonate with Tomi’s death. Ozu seems to portray humans as merely an element of nature and the universe, suggesting that death eventually returns people to a state of nothingness—*mu*, a Zen Buddhist concept of emptiness. As humans are caught in the infinite cycle of life, death and rebirth, Tomi’s death in the early morning insinuates a new start. In a scene near the end of the film, before the funeral begins, the father stands in the garden looking out over Onomichi harbour, with a clear blue sky in the background. The old man says to his daughter-in-law who comes to stand beside him that the weather looks like it is going to be very hot. With this reference, the shift from death to life is subtly reflected by the shift from night to day. In the morning when children are seen to go to school to start a new day, Ozu’s ever-present theme of the life cycle elaborately connects death’s unexpectedness and with life’s continuity.\(^\text{27}\)

The notion of a life cycle is invoked in another way in Kore-eda’s films. The cyclical structure of his films is often expressed in the accentuation placed on the change of the seasons, which links his works with the established tradition of Japanese aesthetics and art (yamato-e). Seasonal imagery frames the traditional art of Japanese landscape

paintings. Kore-edà’s films are abundant with these images. They not only punctuate his films’ progression, but also give a stylistic and thematic meaning. The story of Dare mo shiranai/Nobody Knows (Kore-edà Hirokazu, 2004) begins in early autumn and is structured over the course of a year. As the film gradually develops its story, the passing of time and the change of seasons are made visually prominent with natural and seasonal imagery, such as the leaves turning red and the cherry blossoms fully blooming in the park. A seasonal year is collapsed into a series of long takes. With cinematic portraiture of time’s slow passing and seasonal imagery, Kore-edà’s films tend to present life through the elaboration of memory, which often unfolds through the film’s photogenic illumination. In Wandafuru Raifu/After Life (Kore-edà Hirokazu, 1998), the leading character, Mochizuki, working at a half-way station between heaven and earth, guides and greets the newly dead. Over the next three days he and his colleagues have to help them recall their memories to find the most precious moment of their lives. As a staff member of the half-way station, Mochizuki is himself unable to choose the most defining moment in his life until he helps Watanabe, who had married Mochizuki’s former fiancée. A memory of Mochizuki and his fiancée sitting in the park shortly before he was drafted to serve in the military of the World War II flashes through his mind. A static shot of Mochizuki sitting on the bench and recollecting his youth leads to his soul searching, and then to his own decisive memory, as he realises that, fifty years later, he is a part of someone else’s happiness. This constitutes a decisive moment, when he becomes aware of the meaning of his life and comes to terms with his inevitable death.

In After Life, static shots such as snow falling, clouds moving, and the crafting of light in the empty corridor, are cinematographically suggestive of the passing of time, which is emblematic of Kore-edà’s
overall approach to cinematic narration. His way of shooting also compresses a seasonal cycle within a short passage of cinematic time. In contrast with Ozu, who is prone to litter his films with exquisite scenes of traditional Japanese iconography, cultural rituals and arts, Kore-eda highlights scenic images that establish a narrative condensing of seasonal change into a series of long takes, a unique temporal illumination that points to the cyclic movement of time. The seasonal cycle captured by the static long takes in Kore-eda’s films reflects a pure, direct image of time. The long take’s capturing of the object/landscape is precisely its representation of changes within time, though cinematically compressed. The long take is the simple recording of an action within the same frame; it refuses to break the action, and reveals hidden meanings without disturbing the unity spontaneous to it. The shot, precisely by not being interrupted with cuts, affects the viewers’ perception and consequently influences their interpretation of the spectacle.

In spite of the fact that the three directors are inclined to different themes — family relationships for Ozu, history for Hou, and memory for Kore-eda — they do share stylistic traits in their work; the use of the long take and long shot, whether or not it is a stylistic influence intentionally emulated by each other. Their use of the long take and long shot highlights the quotidian, in which a close representation of every-day living without hyper-realism is reflected. Their distinctive styles, endowed with the transparency of everyday life, manifest aspects of the Asian worldview and Asian people’s attitude towards life, which are, as Kore-eda himself claims, in contrast to its western counterpart, “a kind of non-anthropocentric perspective that reflects unconsciously the

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recognition that human beings are only one part of the world." We find the characters in Ozu’s films are often carried along by life, not particularly wanting to change it; those in Hou’s films are resigned to their fates, not resistant to live with history’s burden; and those in Kore-eda’s are impelled by their past, not eager to deny it.

This non-anthropocentric perspective is reflected in visualisation, implicitly revealed by the directors’ style revolving around the long take and long shot, which to some extent connotes Oneness — humanity as a part of nature and nature as a part of the universe. The Atami sequence in Tokyo Story renders the visual links between human beings and nature, especially when the elderly couple sit on the seawall and the mother feels faint for a moment. Ozu’s camera shot holds steady to focus on the couple, and then gradually zooms out, showing how small the couple appears against the sea; a scene that underlies the tininess of human beings in the world. Kore-eda also depends on the scenery depicted and the distance kept from the camera to reflect the interplay between nature and the

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29 Wu, “The Long Take/Long Shot Stylistic and Non-anthropocentricism,” p. 156. In Wu’s interview with Kore-eda, the director used a Japanese expression, 「人間中心主義ではない」, which can be translated as “non-anthropocentrism” in English to describe the use of long shot/long take technique. According to the Oxford Dictionary, non-anthropocentrism refers to the idea that human beings do not regard themselves as the central or most important element of existence. Without providing a clear explanation to this term, Kore-eda instead mentioned a card he had received from Hou Hsiao-Hsien, on which four Chinese characters, 「天地有情」 were written. Kore-eda believed that these four characters illuminated the meaning of Hou’s shots, such as those on nature. When asked why long shot/long take seems to be commonly used among contemporary East Asian directors, Kore-eda responded to this question with the notion of “non-anthropocentrism,” a way in which, according to him, Asian people see themselves. Kore-eda clearly seems to link 「天地有情」 to non-anthropocentrism to elaborate the cultural meaning of Hou’s and some Asian filmmakers’ use of long shot/long take.
main characters’ emotions. *Disutansul/Distance* (2001) stands out as an example that manifests Kore-edo as discreet in disclosing how people deal with their emotion, by shots of a lake secluded deep in a forest. Without too much dialogue or any dramatic effect, the film often focuses on the deceased perpetrators’ family members facing the lake, either mourning the past or sinking in memory. The static shot of the lake, as if a mirror reflecting the main characters’ thoughts, carries their retrospection and anticipation, and seems to have collapsed the past into a moment of the present, thereby collapsing the distance between now and then. In a similar manner, Hou’s handling of long shots reflects the interaction between human beings and history, notably the way he deals with the representation of violence in *A City of Sadness*, in which he often underscores the representation of massacre by switching the long shot to a panorama landscape, without cutting back to explain what happened. Whether intentionally avoiding focus on the massacre, so as to avoid claiming historical reality, Hou’s landscape shots in *A City of Sadness* provide repeated transitional shots that allude to the repressive moment of history, suggesting that history keeps progressing and changing, and people have to live and bear its trace.

**Conclusion**

Whereas Western culture has tended to regard nature or natural disasters as an object to be conquered and ejected from the self, the Eastern tradition has considered itself as a part of nature. It seems that the three directors’ use of the long take and long shot is not only an elaboration of cinematic style that preserves the spatial and temporal integrity of reality, but one that has also evolved into a new cinematic rhetoric charged with Asian cultural connotation. The films and filmmakers discussed suggest a full/empty philosophy, as well as an
attitude towards the cycle of life, death, and rebirth that is also present in the tradition of scroll painting. These Asian filmmakers’ favoured use of the long take and long shot seems a product of shared cultural experience, not exclusively attributable to the claims of authorship. Starting from a prevailing aesthetic in some recent East Asian films, this paper has probed the cultural meanings carried by the use of the long take and long shot beyond the assumption of western film theory, in the hope of enriching the explanation of “Asian Minimalism.” and capturing the significance of its appearance.

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The Poetics of Asian Minimalism: Long Take/Long Shot Stylistics in the Films of Ozu Yasujiro, Hou Hsiao-Hsien and Kore-edo Hirokazu

I-fen Wu

Abstract

This paper attempts to flesh out suggestions about the use of the long take and long shot in East Asian Cinema. Such stylistic features attest the quick mobility of popular cultural influence in contemporary East Asia, and imitation among directors. The shooting style that Ozu Yasujiro and Hou Hsiao-Hsien have employed through their distanced and fixed camera positioning, and their preference for the long take, has resurfaced in the work of a few younger filmmakers in Asia. In particular, Hou has established the distant long shot and static long take as expressive and denotative devices in themselves, laying the basis of a regional style that David Bordwell has called an “Asian Minimalism.”

Considered to be influenced by Ozu’s and Hou’s style, the films of Kore-edo Hirokazu are linked by stylistic concerns. Indeed, Kore-edo’s films help in any reconsideration of the use of the long take/long shot in contemporary Asian cinema. The three Asian filmmakers’ favoured use of the long take/long shot seems to be a product of shared cultural/historical experience and not exclusively attributable to authorship. Starting by

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questioning an aesthetic tendency that seems so prevalent in recent East Asian films, this paper probes cultural meanings conveyed by use of the long shot and long shot beyond the assumption of western film theory, in hopes of explaining “Asian Minimalism” better and tracing its significance.

**Keywords:** Long Take and Long Shot, Asian Minimalism, Ozu Yasujiro, Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Kore-eda Hirokazu, Non-anthropocentrism