



Brief Analysis of the Application of Long Takes in Hou Hsiao-hsien's Films

Hanqing Zhao

Communication University of China, Nanjing, Nanjing 211172, Jiangsu, China

Abstract: This paper analyzes the use of long takes in Hou Hsiao-hsien's films, pointing out that long takes are the iconic feature of his artistic films. Their use is not influenced by Bazin's theory or foreign film schools, but stems from his own artistic practice and literary nourishment, with his techniques evolving alongside his creative career. Inspired by the "distant overlook" narrative style in Shen Congwen's *Autobiography*, he established a calm and compassionate visual tone, which he initially put into practice in *The Boys from Fengkuei* and *A Summer at Grandpa's*. In his mature creative stage, works such as *The Time to Live and the Time to Die* and *City of Sadness* used long takes to convey family emotions and the weight of the era, while *Goodbye South, Goodbye* employed moving long takes to enhance dramatic tension, thus forging his unique visual style.

Keywords: Hou Hsiao-hsien; long take; visual style

1. Introduction

Long take and medium long shot are considered a sign of Hou Hsiao-hsien's art film. However, there are great changes in the techniques of Hou Hsiao-hsien in each film of his. In the first half stage of his career, before shooting *Good Men, Good Women*, he was accustomed to using stationary long take and liked the vision in the distance. Since *Good Men, Good Women*, he began to try the mobile long take and medium long shot in the movies. Hou Hsiao-hsien liked long take not because he learned Bazin's film theory. In the 1990s, he did not know who Bazin was. As he saw less, he was not affected by the art style of any foreign film genre. He used long take at the beginning not for the aesthetics of movie but for the economical and practical use. "Distant long takes also minimize the demands placed on nonprofessional actors: Hou has spoken of using long takes and distant shots in *The Boys from Fengkuei* for just this reason." [1]

2. The Formation of a Unique Visual Style

In 1980s, the film was very expensive, and filmmakers tried everything in order to save investment. For the same scene, if you take a lot of shots from different directions, and then you shoot close-up, you will spend more money by clipping them together. A long take is much better. Moreover, actors' performance will be more smooth and comfortable through long take. The style of Hou Hsiao-hsien's long take and medium long shot comes from the artistic style of the Chinese writer Shen Congwen. After reading *The Autobiography of Shen Congwen* recommended by Chu Tien-wen, he suddenly found a new method to observe and understand the world.

"*The Boys from Fengkuei* started with a personal experience of mine from when I went to Penghu Island, which I wanted to make into a film about growing up. Chu T'ien-wen asked me from what point of view I was approaching the story, and I really couldn't answer. It was then that T'ien-wen gave me a copy of Shen Congwen's *autobiography*." [2] It means he found a new way of storytelling, being calm, delicate, focused and compassionate. Hou Hsiao-hsien thought the storytelling style of Shen Congwen is from "top view" in the distance. He quickly put the new method into practice in his movie. *The Boys from Fengkuei* is Hou Hsiao-hsien's first art film in a strict sense. According to screenwriter Chu Tien-wen, Hou did not read the script in the shooting site, and her script was sent to staff to read. She first gave the script to Hou, he just applied one sentence in the script. She was very surprised and asked why he hired her as the screenwriter, and Hou answered: "You had been working in the film industry for ten years and she was familiar with the process of shooting a film." We can know that Chu Tien-wen cannot directly control Hou Hsiao-hsien's film, which can also be understood. Film belongs to director rather than screenwriter. But the subtle impact of Chu Tien-wen on Hou Hsiao-hsien's style in literary and art is immeasurable.

In *The Boys from Fengkuei*, long take is not obvious, but the length of a single-lens is longer than that of *The Sandwich Man*. Ah Ching flirted with the girls with his friends at the beach. Waves are beating the shore over and over again, and the four teenagers jumped up and down excitedly in the waves. Behind them, dozens of small boats were in the choppy waves. Long take maintained the integrity of time and space, showing carefree life of the four boys in their hometown. At that time,

they didn't have the troubles of urban people and the sense of social responsibility and family responsibility as an adult. By the long take, viewers can truly feel themselves standing on the beach and dancing with the teenagers with salty waves slapping on their faces. Boys and girls were eating chicken and drinking beer happily at the beach; suddenly a man came and beat one of the teenagers. In the next shot, we learn that the guy who was beaten by the four teenagers sued them to the police station. Although this scene was not filmed by close-up, it is full of a sense of drama. Hou Hsiao-hsien is good at using a long take to make the movie more dramatic. In the long take, the characters had been very quietly doing their own thing, and suddenly a stranger appeared and disturbed them, causing a less strong sense of drama. This is the usual shooting skill of Hou Hsiao-hsien. He said: "drama was not necessarily dramatic love, hatred or fights but an unusual thing in daily life. For example, a housewife is cleaning up the room, and her son suddenly returns home. This is the sense of drama."

Four teenagers just finished fighting and sat at the door of the cabin seaside with the sunset shining on them. Hou Hsiao-hsien adopted the long take. Viewers can only guess their emotions and expressions through their conversation rather than their facial expressions and gestures. Due to the use of long take, viewers were invited to participate in the completion of plot. In the long take, the boys are integrated with the scenic island with special lyrical effect. Ah Ching, Xiaoxing and others were having meal at the door. Ah Ching pretended casually asking Xiao Xing's hometown and her reason to Kaohsiung, she did not want to answer him and hurriedly ate rices and returned to the house. Hou Hsiao-hsien adopted the long take of their meal by sitting around to demonstrate the delicate relationship between Ah Ching and Xiao Xing.

Ah Ching had a crush on Xiao Xing, but she didn't love him. She only cared about her boyfriend. She came to Kaohsiung with Jin He and hoped to earn enough money to get married. But now Jin He quarreled with her every day. Thus Xiao Xing was unhappy when she had the meal and just ate a little and returned to the house, leaving the teenagers unknown. Three teenagers were looking for a cinema in Kaohsiung, and a liar made them go to a building under construction after getting the money. There were no cinemas or even a chair in the high-rise building. In the mobile long take, the four teenagers who have found themselves cheated and walked to the bright place helplessly from the dark stairs, overlooking the great city Kaohsiung. Ironically, one of them said he wanted to take revenge on the liar, and another teenager told him it was Kaohsiung rather than their hometown Fengkuei. The three teenagers overlooked the stream through the streets and tall buildings with complex ideas. The unfamiliar environment and noisy crowds had great impact on them. They were afraid and confused. The upset status of the urban life of the rural adolescents is reflected in many works of Hou Hsiao-hsien. When Jin He left Xiao Xing, she had good time with Ah Ching. They went to the night market and played pool together, but Xiao Xing didn't love him. Finally, one day, she could not go on and decided to quit her job and moved to Taipei. But the film didn't tell us why she went to Taipei, and the viewers should understand it by themselves. Ah Ching went to the station to send Xiao Xing off, and they stood against the railing waiting for the train in silence thoughtfully. Xiao Xing thought of her boyfriend and her uncertain future, and Ah Ching thought that maybe he never had the chance to see the girl again. The Camera is on the other side of the street against them and watching them silently. They looked confused with a variety of vehicles going through constantly between them. In the final several shots of the movie, the three teenagers wanted to run a business before military service. They did stall business and Ah Ching was thinking beside the stall for a long time. Then he suddenly puffed a cigarette, threw the cigarette butt on the ground severely and stood on the chair hawking in an obvious place.

In *A Summer at Grandpa's*, Hou Hsiao-hsien made use of long take, and the length of single-lens is longer. Dong Dong's sister Ting Ting went to the countryside and played with a group of neighborhood kids along a small river. She wanted to paddle with the boys, but they did not want to take her but jumped into the water undressed. Ting Ting stood on the shore alone and watched them with a lonely feeling. While the boys were playing happily with a large black swim ring in the river, Ting Ting thought of a good way to retaliate. She went to a rock on the shore, bent down to throw their clothes and trousers into the river. Clothes drifted downstream along the river, resulting in one of the boys ran home naked and scolded by his mother. The long take makes the scene vivid and childlike. The naked boy got a few pieces of large leaves around his body due to the missing of his clothes, which is interesting. Such interesting details shorten the summer and make the viewers have temporarily forgotten the serious illness of Dong Dong and Ting Ting's mother. Another boy lost the cattle and went looking for it, but he did not go home. His family looked for him and went to Dong Dong's grandpa's house after knowing he was playing with Dong Dong before. Dong Dong was kneeling at that time is in the hallway. The child's parents stood on the stairs, nervously asking where the child went after he left Dong Dong. Dong Dong said he went looking for the cattle. Dong Dong's grandma didn't know what to say but just asked them to drink tea. The long take presented the nervous status of the mother who was looking for her son. Dong Dong's uncle took him to play snooker, and his girlfriend was sitting in a chair next to watch them play with eye contact with the uncle from time to time. His uncle understood the meaning and left Dong Dong alone to make love with his girlfriend in a secluded place. After Dong Dong's grandfather found it, he was very angry and picked up a stick to beat Dong Dong's uncle, and his uncle hurried out of the room. The grandpa was old and couldn't

catch up with him. He stopped breathing for a while and found that the uncle did not escape far away but stood ten meters away watching him. The grandpa looked back and found his uncle's motorcycle park behind himself and then he picked up the stick and hit the motorcycle harshly. The uncle wanted to stop him, but he worried that his father would beat him. He hesitated for a while and eventually escaped. The long take shows a wealth of information. The various subtle mental activities of anger and fear of the grandfather and the uncle were reflected through the long take vividly.

3. The Masterful Application of Long Takes

The fixed long take in *The Time to Live and Time to Die* is more skilful and the length of shot is longer. Hou Hsiao-hsien used to avoid the most dramatic moment of a complete story, and this is why his films seem very dull. He tries to state an event calmly and uncritically by learning from Shen Congwen's novels. The scene of the father's death is the most important one in the film. On an ordinary evening, the power outage occurred in Ah Hsiao's family and they had to light a candle. Electricity was restored quickly, but the sister of Ah Hsiao screamed suddenly and scared the whole family. The mother went to the study and found the father's head weakly leaning back motionless and died. The anxious mother and grandmother slapped his father's chest and pinched his nose, but his father's lips have become white, apparently they had been unable to change the fact his father's death. Their mood turned from the surprise and anxiety to grief. The next few long takes show the grief of the family due to the death of the father. The father's body was placed in a bed made of bamboo, and the mother fell on his father's chest with tears. With her head close to the ground in sorrow, the sister held the cold hand of the father and then asked her brothers to touch him to say goodbye to their father. The brother apparently was terrified and could not shed tears at that time, but the sister was sad by leaning grandmother's shoulder. The grandmother felt sorry for her dead son and even cried to have a cough. There is a large amount of information in the long takes, and the actions and expressions of the figures look very complicated. It completely reflects the grief of a family for the death of the father. Before the death of the father, the long take already reflected the depressed atmosphere of the family. Ah Hsiao was admitted to high school, and he came home to tell the good news to his parents. His grandmother was pleased and rewarded him pocket money, but his father was not too happy when he heard the good news as he had been feeble due to disease for many years. At that time, the father was reading a book with glasses and the sister was scrubbing the floor. She was dressed in school uniforms and skirts and talked about her memories of high school, recalling the movements and facial expressions of her father, mother and brother. In the memories, her father was very happy when he knew she was admitted to high school and he was very proud of her when she got one hundred points in math exam. During her recollection, the mother also took a rag and scrubbed the floor with her. Father probably was tired after reading or couldn't tolerate their conversation; he closed the book and his eyes to have a rest by leaning his head against the seat back. The sister talked to herself for a long time and stopped her recollection when it came to unhappy things. She got up and left the room. At this time, the father is still leaning his head against the back and he may simply not listen to the memories of the past of the sister; the mother kept cleaning the floor and obviously she heard the words of the sister without any response or glance to her. Even the sister left the room, the mother only gently tipped her head and glanced at her direction and then continue to clean the floor.

"The family's cramped finances do not allow her to attend, though, so she must be married off, whereas the elder brother will go to college if he passes his exam. As Hui-lan recalls her dashed hopes, the mother comes into the rear of the shot, wiping down the bamboo furniture."^[3] From the meaningful long take, we can see that the normal exchanges between family members had become impossible in such a repressive family atmosphere. The daughter recalled so emotionally, the parents completely did not reply. Maybe they were involuntary: his father was tortured by disease and could not listen to her, while the mother was busy with households and taking care of three children and she did not mind these words. There is a very sharp contrast here. In memory of the sister, the father was happy when he heard she was admitted to high school, and he was very proud to say that other children of the neighbors are not admitted to high school. Now the father has come to the end of life and has been weak all day due to lung disease. He did not smile when he heard his son was also admitted to high school but just nodded. This contrast deepened the sad atmosphere in the film. Hou Hsiao-hsien described his sad childhood memories to the viewers precisely through such a wealth of meaningful long takes. The mother's death also had great impact on them, and Ah Hsiao cried sadly in her Christian-style funeral.

The first take of *Dust in the Wind* is a long one. Hou Hsiao-hsien fixed the camera on the train. With the train moving forward, the viewers can see the trees and valleys on both sides of the railway. In addition to the friction noise emitted by the train and tracks, there seems no other noise in the quiet area. Ah Yuan's family live in such a small village in the mountains. Ah Yuan's younger brother didn't want to have the meal, and his grandfather tried to persuade him to eat and patiently reasoned with him. This take allows viewers to experience village life and the warmth between grandfather and grandson. In the last scene of the film, Ah Yuan who just returned to the village from the city and the grandpa were in the fields Ah. Ah

Yuan helped his grandfather light a cigarette and then squatted on a rock to listen to his grandfather's teachings. Grandfather smoked and watched the clouds, surrounded by mountains and rivers. He talked to Ah Yuan about the weather and harvest conditions change this year. Ah Yuan was listening, and he nodded from time to time. After losing the unforgettable love and job, Ah Yuan returned home with his soul. His spirit returned from the complicated relationships in the noisy city to the simple rustic rural lifestyle, which makes him feel reborn. In the last shot of *Dust in the Wind*, it is a scene of the villages in the mountains overlooking from the top of the mountains. Where there are clouds, there is sunlight shining the villages. The scene is so quiet with unspeakable sadness and nostalgia.

At the beginning of *A City of Sadness*, there is an impressive long take: Wen-heung just ran a restaurant, and the family members were busy organizing a banquet to celebrate it. Ah-lu was sitting next to the table to smoke alone, the son Wen-heung came to talk with him. As he was busy and became impatient with his father's inquiry. He even criticized and yelled at his father. At the end of the film, there is a long take in line with this shot. On the same table, the old man was sitting in the same place for dinner, children and relatives walked over to offer more dishes and soup. The third son Wen-leung had meal with him beside him. The scene seems lively and peaceful, but there is a huge misery and grief. If you watch closely, you can find the eyes of Wen-leung are very dull, indicating that he was completely insane and could not take care of himself. As for the other three sons, Wen-heung was shot to death in the fight with the underworld; Wen-ching was arrested by the Taiwanese government, hovering between life and death. The second son had left home for many years and nobody heard of it since he went to the Philippines. So this long take is similar to the long take at the beginning of the movie, but the living status of family has undergone tremendous change. However, these huge turmoil and tragic death are hidden in Hou Hsiao-hsien's calm and indifferent narration. By comparing these two shots, sadness becomes more unable to control, life and death between the beloved has become common in that turbulent era.

The long take of *The Puppet Master* is more shocking. It is more fixed and the length has also increased. There are a lot of documentary long takes in different parts of the movie. In these long takes, Li Tianlu was sitting in as scene specially designed by the crew and taking about the legend of his life in face of the camera. Hou Hsiao-hsien deliberately blurred the boundaries of feature film and documentary, making the conversion between the two natural. When the audiences listen to the story, they would not feel they are interrupted. The ups and downs of the old man's life were displayed to the audience in his calm and honest narration. Hou Hsiao-hsien used several long takes to shot the puppet performance of Tianlu performance. Puppets were manipulated by Li Tianlu and his colleagues to present variety of body movements in order to please the viewers. Behind the small stage, some people dubbed the show to make it appear more complete and natural. These shots formed a sharp contrast; before the World War II, the puppet performed by Tianlu was a traditional Chinese opera, we can see these puppets are ancient Chinese emperors, famous officials and immortal characters. But after the outbreak of World War II, the Japanese army did not allow him to perform Chinese traditional opera but make up new stories to praise the Japanese militarism. Hou Hsiao-hsien presented these important episodes of complete puppet show on the screen with a fixed long takes. The vicissitudes of history and wars between nations were reflected most vividly by these long takes. When Tianlu performed traditional repertoire, the dubbed language was Taiwan dialect and then turned into Japanese. This scene recalls the audience of the history of being invaded and insulted. The last scene of the film depicts the situation after the war, the people of Taiwan worked together to break down the abandoned military aircrafts and sold them. They joyfully exchanged the money from demolition of airplanes for a puppet show. At that time, Tianlu can finally be allowed to perform Chinese traditional operas, and Taiwan finally was liberated from the Japanese invaders. Under the sunset, people broke down the airplanes with hammers and other tools. The scene was serene and beautiful. It laments the history of the nation with hope.

Long take technique of Hou Hsiao-hsien has changed in *Good Men, Good Women*, and the fixed long take is replaced by a mobile one. The shooting technique was adopted more skillfully in *Goodbye South, Goodbye*. Biantou and a group of people were sitting at the table for dinner, he quarreled with an older man. Biantou was young, aggressive and unconvinced. He smoked by holding his legs with a cynical look. When he was offended by complaint from others, he did not immediately get angry but waited for a moment, and then he suddenly threw the shells on his face and provoked him to fight. In this scenario, facial expressions and movements of everyone were presented by a long take. This sudden burst of the calm has a very strong sense of drama. Hou Hsiao-hsien is a master of using long takes to express the dramatic tension of the story. In another long take, Biantou was riding a motorcycle with Gao in a small road in the mountains. Mahua was sitting behind him, and the three people were so happy. The actors almost have no lines. Even there are lines, they are purely improvisational. Rocks and scenery on both sides passed behind them. Although they did not have a decent job and were often involved in some troubles of the underworld, they were happy now. When they rode a motorcycle in the mountains, they seemed to have temporarily forgotten troubles in their life. This shot presents a different kind of unfettered freedom and a positive and optimistic life attitude.

4. Conclusion

The artistic evolution of the use of long takes in Hou Hsiao-hsien's films has been rarely influenced by Western cinema. Rooted in local life experiences, it has developed into a visual system with temporal-spatial integrity and emotional depth through long-term artistic exploration. With a calm perspective of "distant overlook", he constructs dramatic power through everyday details and invites the audience to participate in interpretation via the blank spaces in long takes. The masterful application of this cinematic technique has made his films unique and distinctive in style, establishing his position in the global film industry.

Acknowledgments

This paper is one of the research achievements of Key Project of Jiangsu Provincial Education Science Planning — "Research on the Cultivation of Creativity of Top-notch Innovative Talents in Media and Art Disciplines of Jiangsu Universities Driven by AI" (Project No.: B/2025/01/189); approved by Jiangsu Academy of Educational Sciences, hosted by Hanqing Zhao.

References

- [1] Lu, S. H., & Yeh, E. Y. (2005). Chinese-language film: Historiography, poetics, politics. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. P158.
- [2] Berry, M. (2005). Speaking in images: Interviews with contemporary Chinese filmmakers. New York: Columbia University Press. P247.
- [3] Bordwell, D. (2005). Figures traced in light: On cinematic staging. Berkeley, Ca.; London: University of California Press. P208.