Transcultural Spaces: Toward a Poetics of Chinese Film

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

It is striking how, in examining Chinese film, so many scholars seem indifferent to the craft traditions which shape the way movies look and sound. An approach through poetics can restore this dimension to research, while acknowledging the undeniable artistic gifts which filmmakers bring to their activity. A poetics-based inquiry can also open up a terrain of questions that are not as easy to identify when the research approach starts with a broad theory of culture, society, or ideology and then finds portions of films which fit that theory. In the filmmaking strategies and tactics utilized, several traditions of Chinese cinema point out ways in which films can cross boundaries of both nation and culture. By mastering several transcultural possiblities of cinema, Chinese films have gained the power to cross national boundaries and be grasped by audiences around the world. The debts of Hong Kong cinema, Taiwanese cinema, and mainland Chinese cinema to transcultural norms of filmmaking are examined, as well as their particular recastings of those norms.

FULL TEXT

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Any phenomenon that grows in strength and renown over twenty years can hardly be dismissed as a fad, so it seems well past time to acknowledge that Chinese-language filmmaking, active in several countries and very different film industries, has become central to world film culture. Artistically speaking, Chinese cinema is more energetic and imaginative than the American studio cinema and most of the work coming out of Europe. Understanding this cinema in all its aspects is thus an urgent task for scholars who wish to stay in touch with the creative work of their time.

But how best to understand the artistic accomplishments of the traditions which make up "Chinese film"? Over the last two decades many scholars have made great headway in this task, yet we have scarcely begun to appreciate the aesthetic strategies which make these films so remarkable. In what follows, I want to suggest some benefits that could flow from inquiring into how these films elicit particular effects--what I've elsewhere called a poetics of cinema--and in pursuing such problems I'm following a path marked out by others.[1]

To ask about the poetics governing any filmmaking tradition is to pose at least four broad questions. By what principles are the films created as distinctive wholes--narratives, or other kinds of wholes? Call this domain the poetics of overarching form. How is the film medium deployed in a film or body of films? Call this stylistics. How do form and style shape the uptake of spectators? Call this the theory of spectatorial activity. How, over time, do form and style exhibit patterns of continuity and change, and how might we best explain these patterns? Call this historical poetics.

Put this way, inquiry into principles of overall composition, spectatorial activity, and historical traditions would seem to set aside what most concerns many scholars: the ways in which films embody the traces of social and cultural factors. But poetics doesn't rule out appeal to such factors. Poeticians mount explanations, both

functional explanations and causal ones; for example, how do the parts work together to create this distinctive whole, and what circumstances make those principles and wholes emerge at some times rather than others? Thus the poetician can study how films' form and style bear the traces of the mode of production which has created them, and beyond that, how cultural processes shape film form and style. In seeking causal answers, a film poetics operates "from the bottom up," asking us to start with the principled regularities of form and style we can find in the films, and then to ask what real-world activities could plausibly play causal roles in creatingthem.[2]
A signal advantage offered by poetics is that it makes allowance for artistry. Filmmakers spend an enormous amount of time getting things the way they want them--fiddling with the script, auditioning dozens of

[1] Yueh-yu Yeh, "The Poetics of Hou Hsiao-Hsien's Films: Flowers of Shanghai,"in *Cinedossier: The 35th Golden Horse Awards-Winning Films* (Taipei:Golden Horse Film Festival, 1999), 94-97; James Udden, "Hou Hsiao-Hsien andthe Poetics of History," *Cinema-Scope* 3 (Spring 2000): 48-51.
[2] For examples of this approach, see Bordwell, *Narration in the FictionFilm* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1985); Bordwell, Janet Staiger, andKristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode ofProduction to 1960* (New York: Columbia UP, 1985); Bordwell, *Ozu andthe Poetics of Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1988); and Bordwell,*The Cinema of Eisenstein* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993). I propose moreabstract arguments for a poetics of film in *Making Meaning: Inference andRhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989),263-74.

actors, trying out different locations and camera angles and cutting patterns. Of course time and money create pressures, and no filmmaker gets everything she wants; there are always compromises, zones of indecision, lucky accidents, and flat-out mistakes. Still, as an artisan, the filmmaker has resources of knowledge about what works and doesn't work. Passed from filmmaker to filmmaker over time, this knowledge coalesces into craft traditions, and these in turn provide schemas, those repeated patterns of shot composition, of lighting, of camera movement or editing which get the job done. The concept of norm-governed schemas seems to me indispensible for appreciating what film artists have accomplished. Who would study Chinese landscape painting without being aware of the different options for representing space (what T. C. Lai translates as "high-distance" composition, "flat-distance" composition, "deep-distance" composition)?[3]Who would study Peking Opera without recognizing the varieties of face-painting *(lianpu)?* We readily admit that artistry in other media can be appreciated only through being aware of the forms which artists have inherited. Yet I'm struck by how, in examining Chinese film, so many scholars seem indifferent to the craft traditions which shape the way movies look and sound. An approach through poetics can restore this dimension to our research, while acknowledging the undeniable artistic gifts which filmmakers bring to their activity.
A poetics-based inquiry can also open up a terrain of questions that are not as easy to identify when the research approach is more "top-down"--when, that is, we start with a broad theory of culture, society, or ideology and then find portions of films which fit that theory. This is not an objection to cultural theories, or Theory *tout court*--we shall always need theories, at many levels of generality--but a methodological point. Poetics, as I conceive it, is an inductive, empirical discipline that gives priority to the integrity of the given film, the particularities of the film medium, and the choices made by historical agents working within institutions. The poetician needs to be aware of a range of theories precisely in order to see their relative value for explaining individual cases. A poetics could canvass many cultural theories to explain the regularities and idiosyncrasies we find at the level of the films themselves.[4]

Poetics is inherently a comparative undertaking. To isolate principles of style or narrative, to try to characterize how films engage spectatorial activity, to mount a historical argument about influence or innovation, one can scarcely avoid seeking out differences and similarities across a range of filmmaking practices. It is not just that Hong Kong cinema was influenced by Hollywood cinema; we can, if we're attentive, trace out differences, both large and small, against a background of similarities. More strikingly, by taking a comparative perspective, we are better prepared to give as much weight to convergences as to divergences. As it turns out, this is of particular value in studying Chinese film. For in film studies today, we often concentrate automatically on the specificities, even the uniqueness, of the culture in which a film is embedded. It's common, for instance, to treat Hong Kong cinema since the early 1980s as addressing the impending 1997 handover, or to considerTaiwanese film as part of a complex process of recognizing modernity and contemporary Taiwanese identity. I would not object to these interpretations, which shed light on many aspects of the film. My point is that by looking at the films from the bottom up, we can activate other aspects, and those aspects may lead us to quite another perspective--one I'm going to be calling transcultural. Put another way, culture is as significant in the affinities we find among societies as in the differences which distinguish them. Indeed, those differences often only spring into focus against a background of affinities.

My thesis is this: in the filmmaking strategies and tactics utilized, several traditions of Chinese cinema point up ways in which films can cross boundaries of both nation and culture. One way to study this

[3] C. Lai, *Understanding Chinese Painting* (Hong Kong: Kelly &Walsh,1980), 91-94.

[4] For examples of how cultural processes can be relevant explanations forartistic activities, see Bordwell, *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema*,Chapters 3 and 8; Bordwell, *The Cinema of Eisenstein*, 33-39, 164-68,and passim.

process would be to consider Chinese culture as a diasporan one, and Chinese cinema as a kind of pan-Chinese cultural vehicle. This seems to me a very fruitful approach, but one I'm not competent to pursue here. Instead, beginning with some features of the films, I want to consider how it's possible for certain stylistic patterns to be traced to transcultural processes.

Those factors include some international norms of film style, and some wide-ranging--I daresay universal--conditions of filmmaking itself. Chinese films, to put it bluntly, are Chinese; but they're also films. And films are a powerful transcultural medium, drawing not only on local knowledge but also on a range of human skills which are shared across many cultures. By mastering several transcultural possibilities of cinema, Chinese films have gained the power to cross national boundaries and be grasped by audiences around the world. It's not that everyone "reads" these films in a uniform way; the commonalities I want to trace operate at a more basic, but still quite powerful and pervasive, level.

If we simply look at films from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, we can see, going back quite far, a common stylistic point of departure: the classical continuity system associated with Hollywood since the late 1910s.[5]Several commentators have pointed out the reliance of Chinese cinema upon the basic strategies of this style: establishing and reestablishing shots to inform the audience of spatial layouts; analysis of the space by means of analytical editing, shot/ reverse-shot, and eyeline-matching; camera movements to reframe characters, to track with them as they walk, or to move in to isolate a detail. With the coming of sound, takes became longer, camera movements got more complicated, and more filmmakers were drawn to staging in depth. Parallel to these changes, local film industries around the world developed approximate equivalents of Hollywood's division of labor. And this shouldn't surprise us: on the basis of what we know so far, classical continuity became a lingua

franca of film style for all the world's mass-market cinemas.

To pose the matter this way is to raise the question of whether such a framework is an imposition of a "Western" conception of cinema, and of human action and identity, upon cultures which don't have such conceptions. For some scholars it is parallel to the question of whether the representational forms known collectively as Renaissance perspective is a distinctively Western mode of seeing imposed on alternative representational traditions. I don't see it quite this way, though to explain in detail why would take me afield. So let me simply say that while the classical continuity framework is definitely a convention, it is a convention which is more quickly learned than alternative ones which we might postulate. And it's more quickly learned at least partly because it mobilizes several contingent universals of human experience. This framework exploits, among other things, our ability to identify other members of our species; to "read their minds" in terms of posture, glance,and expression; to situate them in a world of enduring middle-sized objects; to assume as a default value that action unfolds in sequence over time.[6]Just as certain phonological and syntactic rules are theoretically possible but never occur in all the world's languages, we could imagine other representational systems (such as filming every scene upside down, or by framing figures so that we never see facial expressions) but which never occur in the world's popular cinemas. In addition, the continuity system, once mastered, permits the efficient and predictable turning out of films--an advantage for any film industry.

I'm not saying that the continuity framework is wired into our brains, or genetically programmed.[7]Nor is it some cinematic essence which enterprising filmmakers have revealed through patient excavation.[8]It constitutes a contingent discovery, through trial and error, of one powerful, quickly learnable vehicle of visual communication. Had history been different, some other formats, perhaps Tom Gunning's

5 See Kristin Thompson, "The Formulation of the Classical Style, 1909-1928,"in Bordwell et al., *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 155-40.

6 I elaborate this cross-cultural bridgehead argument in "Convention,Construction, and Cinematic Vision," in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing FilmStudies*, ed. David Bordwell and Noel Carroll (Madison: U of Wisconsin P,1996), 87-107.

7 It wouldn't occur to me to enter this caveat were this argument notpersistently misunderstood. See, for a common misreading, Miriam BratuHansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as VernacularModernism," in *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. Christine Gledhill andLinda Williams (New York: Oxford UP, 2000), 339.

8 I argue against such essentialist accounts in *On the History of FilmStyle* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997), 149-57.

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"cinema of attractions" or the 1900s tableau cinema,[9]might have endured longer.

So classical conventions for the representation of space and time are constructions, but they're constructed out of human predispositions, and a great many of those--more than we're usually inclined to grant--are shared across cultures. For historical reasons, the continuity system, I propose, has become a transcultural bridgehead. Most Chinese films, like films from India or Argentina, are at this level comprehensible to audiences around the world. Why? Because, after brief exposure and minimal tutoring, this pervasive set of conventions makes a film's fictional world easily accessible to mature perceivers in any culture.

It's not surprising to find, then, that like most national film industries of the 1920s and 1930s, Shanghai's cinema accepted the continuity framework. Chris Berry, Leo Oufan Lee, and other scholars have shown in detail what even a quick sampling of this cinema will confirm: the continuity principles were quickly mastered and frequently utilized by a variety of filmmakers.[10]Thanks to conventions of angle and eyeline-match editing, Yuan Muzhi's

Street Angel keeps its principal apartment location clear and cogent while almost never showing the room in its entirety. And the gags with the boys putting on a show for the woman across the way depend wholly upon the same principles that Hitchcock was later to exploit in Rear Window. Similarly, distinctive as Ruan Lingyu's radiant performances are, they're predicated upon a standardized system of shooting and cutting which could set off her expressions and postures.

Taking our bearings with reference to this transcultural bridgehead, how might a comparative Chinese film stylistics proceed? I'll look at Hong Kong cinema and Taiwanese cinema in some detail, with mainland cinema, of which my knowledge is spotty, sandwiched in between. Throughout, my interest is to raise some issues in how we might start to understand these traditions' debts to transcultural norms, as well as their particular recastings of those norms.

The study of international film style is really just starting, but it seems clear that once filmmakers in any country adopted classical continuity, they realized that it didn't have to be followed slavishly. It could be extended, refined, and explored. Perhaps the best example we have is Japan, where directors recast continuity norms in remarkable ways. A less obvious instance, but one which is of no less interest, is afforded by Hong Kong cinema of the 1980s and 1990s.

Here we have a scaled-down model of a popular cinema operating outside Hollywood. Hong Kong remains a cottage industry with some vertical integration, a fluid labor pool, well-developed technology, a core of controlling distributors, and sources of financing adequate for the low-budget levels of local production. Hong Kong filmmaking also had access to a market beyond its borders--Singapore, Taiwan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, South Korea, Japan to some extent, and Chinatowns dotted throughout the world. This cinema also gained a purchase in the mainstream theatres of Europe and North America, first in the 1970s with the kung-fu boom emblematized by Bruce Lee, then in the late 1980s and 1990s with fan subcultures, particularly those around the gunplay sagas of John Woo.

Because of its industrial structure, its reliance on stars and genres, and its kinship with American cinema, it's tempting to agree with Peter Chan Ho-sun, who calls Hong Kong film "more Hollywood than Hollywood."[11] At a deeper level, we can acknowledge what the fanboys and fangirls already know: this is a visceral cinema. Pain, bloodletting, farts, runny noses, the greasy fingers and face you get while eating--all these universal human experiences are at the center of these films. Who cannot understand the gag in *Tricky Brains* when Steven Chiau offers his father a piece of toilet paper as a tissue, explaining as the father wipes his face, "It was used, but I cleaned it off?" Who doesn't writhe in pain when Anthony Wong shrieks during police torture

[9] See Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator, andthe Avant-Garde," in *Early Cinema: Space*, *Frame*,*Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (London: British Film Institute,1990), 56-60. For a summary of the argument see *On the History of FilmStyle*, 125-28.

[10] Chris Berry, "Sexual Difference and the Viewing Subject in *LiShuangshuang* and *The In-Laws*," in *Perspectives on ChineseCinema*, ed. Berry (London: BFI, 1991), 33-37; Leo Ou-fan Lee, *ShanghaiModern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China*, *1930-1945*(Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999), 96-106.

[11] Interview with Peter Chan, 28 Nov. 1996.

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in *The Untold Story?* In a parallel way, through a kind of Lippsian empathy, who cannot feel oneself flinching when a martial artist delivers a powerful blow, or straining to lift one's backside when Jet Li effortlessly hurls himself up to the sky in the kung-fu competition in *Fong Sai-yuk?* Here is an obvious way in which cinema can go

transcultural: by addressing us at the level of sheer stimulation, recording the torsions of the body in extremis and trusting that it will stir us to what Eisenstein called "reflexively repeating, albeit in weakened form" the original expressive movement.[12]

Yet the perspective of poetics lets us posit more than a cinema of gore, grossout humor, and daredevil stunts. Hong Kong films display some subtle reworkings of classical staging, shooting, and cutting, and these contribute to the unique flavor of this popular cinema. For one thing, Hong Kong filmmakers, probably drawing from indigenous Chinese traditions of theatre and martial arts, have developed a rhythmic conception of expressive movement that builds upon the sheerly visceral aspect of cinema's appeal. By presenting a cleanly delineated piece of action, framed at beginning and end by a slight pause, Hong Kong filmmakers have created a distinctive staccato rhythm. This is in turn amplified by color, music, editing, framing, and other film techniques. And not only fight scenes display this rhythmic tendency. Once it was mastered, filmmakers conceive dramatic and comic scenes which can be subjected to marked rhythmic patterning.[13]

Something else is going on in these films, and we can't fully understand it without taking a comparative tack. For Hollywood itself changed its stylistic norms somewhat in the 1970s and 1980s--not, as some have argued, by embracing fragmentation and discontinuity,[14]but by narrowing certain stylistic choices and weighting certain others. I call this new approach "intensified continuity."

What constitutes this "intensified continuity"? Most notably, accelerated cutting rates. US films move from an average shot length (ASL) of 5-8 seconds in the 1970s to around 3-6 seconds in the mid-1990s. By the end of the 1990s, a great many films have an ASL of two to three seconds. Along with fast cutting, there's an emphasis on a comparatively close shot scale. Of course there are close-ups throughout the history of cinema, but in the 1980s and 1990s, the scale shifts: a filmmaker is likely to work with a range of medium-shots, medium-close-ups, and tight close-ups, rather than the medium-long shot and long shot of the 1950s. Once filmmakers learned how to compose closeups in widescreen during the 1960s, there appears a greater emphasis on tight facial close-ups, with long-shots functioning less as establishing shots and more as accents within a scene. Because of the widescreen ratio, a tight shot can supply enough overall sense of the setting to make traditional establishingshots less obligatory. Because of the concentration on closeups, there's also more racking focus, as one head goes out of focus and another, in the foreground or background, comes in. Finally, practitioners of intensified continuity exploit a great deal of camera movement--particularly what we might call the prowling camera. In the 1970s several lightweight camera systems, chiefly Panaflex and Steadicam, were devised to permit versatile tracking shots. Today nearly every American film will include virtuoso following shots through a location, looming track-ins to characters in shot/reverse shot, and a constantly sliding or arcing or circling or swooping camera. I don't have time here to pursue possible historical explanations for the development of intensified continuity, but the answer probably lies partly in filmmakers efforts to adust classical principles to their conception of what would be suited for a film's ultimate venue: the video monitor.[15]

From the 1970s to the 1990s, as Hollywood was establishing intensified continuity as its major stylistic norm, Hong Kong directors picked up on it and revised it in key ways. The most obvious instance is the work of John Woo, who seems to have mastered all the grace notes of intensified continuity

12 Sergei Eisenstein and Sergei Tretyakov, "Expressive Movement," *MillenniumFilm Journal* 3 (Winter/Spring 1979): 38. The essay is originally from1923.

13 See Bordwell, "Aesthetics in Action: Kung Fu, Gunplay, and CinematicExpressivity," in *Fifty Years of Electric Shadows*, ed. Law Kar (HongKong: Urban Council/ Hong Kong International Film Festival, 1997), 81-89, andBordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art ofEntertainment* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000) Chapter 8.

14 For example, several essays in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, ed. SteveNeale and Murray Smith (London: Routledge, 1998) presuppose narrativefragmentation operates in recent Hollywood films. See in particular JamesSchamus, "To the Rear of the Back End: The Economics of IndependentCinema," 91-105, and Thomas

Elsaesser, "Specularity and Engulfment: FrancisFord Coppola and *Bram Stoker's Dracula*," 191-208. Murray Smith offerssome useful clarifications of the issue in "Theses on the Philosophy ofHollywood History," 3-20.
[15] I examine this stylistic trend in "Intensified Continuity: Aspects of VisualStyle in Contemporary Hollywood," *Film Quarterly* (forthcoming, Fall2001).

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fig. 1.

fig. 2.in his films of the mid-1980s. Forget the balletic gunplay for a moment; even in dialogue scenes he displays his indebtedness to this strategy, with constantly arcing and swooping camera movements accompanied by rack focus and abrupt close-up entrances and exits.
Such sequences have counterparts in the work of Tsui Hark, Yuen Kuei, Sammo Hung, Johnnie To, and many others, and they show that filmmakers steeped in a tradition of expressive movement could adapt changing international norms to their own purposes.
Intensified continuity, though developed on American multimillion-dollar pictures, also offers advantages to lower-budget filmmakers. Close-ups are faster and cheaper to light than long shots; relying on editing gives you flexibility in postproduction. A mobile camera allows filmmakers to switch setups faster, and generally speed up shooting on location (particularly when, as in Hong Kong, sound is dubbed later). With the supply house of Salon Films renting Panaflex cameras for handheld work, and editors working to assemble as many as fifteen hundred shots, Hong Kong filmmakers could produce work that approximated the production values and visual style of American cinema.
Consider a moment in Benny Chan's *The Big Bullet* (1996), produced when Hong Kong budgets were tightening. Biu and his squadmate Apple need to get into a guarded telephone office, and so they fake a robbery attempt in order to distract the guards. Although the overall average shot length for the film is 4.1 seconds, typical for an American film of the same period, this particular scene is handled in a single shot, with tight, fluid close-ups and marked use of racking focus. Apple has just triggered the alarm. Bill blocks the surveillance camera and signals Apple to move toward him (). The camera pans right as they duck and flee offscreen left (). A guard opens the door (), comes toward the camera, followed by another (), and halts in tight medium-close-up (). As he turns, the camera pans in time to catch Bill and Apple pretending they've just heard the summons (). They run to the foreground, with Bill favored and Apple visible in the middle (). As Bill argues with the first guard, she pushes the second guard aside in the background (), and assumes his position, creating a compact composition (). The two cops then rush through the doorway (). This sort of scene can be shot quickly and cheaply, thanks to tight framings and simple camera movements that emphasize dialogue and facial reactions.
It seems likely, then, that Hong Kong filmmakers, who had already exploited the dynamic power of editing and close-ups in swordplay and kung-fu films, were prepared to extend and refine the canons of intensified continuity. The task was made easier not only by new technologies but also by Hollywood's favoring of techniques which were fairly easy to replicate on lower budgets. In general, much of what we think of as the "new Hong Kong cinema" within the mainstream industry was a creative reworking of what were coming to be international norms of mass-market filmmaking--norms often given a precision and kinetic impact not developed much in Western

cinema.

p.14

fig. 3.

fig. 4.

fig. 5.

fig. 6.

fig. 7.

fig. 8.

fig. 9.

fig. 10.

The mainstream commercial cinema isn't, of course, the only network through which the world's cinema flows. During the 1970s and 1980s film festivals proliferated, and these acquired a vast appetite for films from all regions. Today, with more than 400 festivals worldwide, film festivals constitute virtually a separate distribution circuit, showcasing films in cities which will never screen those films in commercial theatres. What plays at these festivals? A large part of the programming consists of "art films," those small-scale, often difficult or formally

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fig. 11. ***il grido*** (1957)adventurous films which aren't judged to be marketable by major international distributors.

These films find theatrical venues in "art cinemas."
What's perhaps most evident about this output are certain conventions of branding and packaging. Eroticism is primary: art films since the 1950s have been marketed as daringly sexy. Children are another prominent appeal, from *Bicycle Thieves* and *The 400 Blows* to *Salaam Bombay* and *Life Is Beautiful*. A third factor is exoticism, as Chinese film imports testify. The publicity for *Farewell My Concubine* played it up as a sumptuous costume drama, with a dash of sexual transgressiveness. If we look beyond subject matter, though, we find that many "art films" share a certain approach to storytelling and film style, influenced by modernist movements in various media.[16]In particular, a stylistic tactic which emerged in European art cinema of the 1970s and 1980s becomes quite relevant to understanding another way in which Chinese cinema has gone global. This strategy reacts against the staging practices upon which classical continuity norms rely.
Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, many European directors had paralleled Hollywood filmmakers in using the wide-angle, deep image for dramatic scenes (). But for a variety of reasons, during the 1960s a different sort of image emerges. In such shots the camera is set up perpendicular to the rear plane, and the human figure is presented in a way so as to avoid the 3/4 view. Instead, we view the characters in frontal or profiled views, and sometimes from directly behind ().
We're tempted to call such images "flat." As Godard put it, "This is not a 'just image'; it is just an image." Still, "flat" as they look, these shots still represent depth. We can borrow Heinrich Wölfflin's term, "planimetric," to describe images like these, which present depth as a series of parallel planes. There might be quite a lot of these planes, suggesting many layers of space (and thus depth) but they lack that sense of diagonals plunging into the background we get with more "recessional" compositions.

fig. 12. ***vivre sa vie*** (1962)In the 1960s the planimetric composition offered filmmakers an opportunity to create quasi-abstract compositions that stressed the artificiality of the image. In addition, during the period that Hollywood was exploiting pyrotechnics and special effects to reinvigorate cinematic spectacle, the planimetric image invested art cinema with its own, albeit muted, pictorial spectacle. Few directors of the 1980s and 1990s escape the influence of this image, either independent filmmakers in the US, or industry-based ones in Asia. The Japanese director Suo Masayuki used it in his pastiches of *Ozu*, while it became central to Kitano Takeshi's style. Edward Yang's early films also drew on this aesthetic, from the very first shot of *Desires* () to the handling of the Eurasian woman's adventures in *The Terrorizers:*

[16] *Narration in the Fiction Film*, Chapter 10.

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fig. 13.

fig. 14.at one point a planimetric shot catches her lifting a john's wallet ().
Once this image becomes a major design feature, filmmakers tend to rethink their staging and cutting options in relation to it. Now shots are filmed and cut according to a sort of compass-point principle, with shot-changes

organized in multiples of 90 degrees. A fine example comes from Mainland China, He Jianjun's *Postman* (1995). While the young postman is sorting mail with the woman coworker, he's slipping a letter into the batch, and normal continuity editing is adapted to a more stringent pattern of setups suitable to planimetric imagery.

We start with a medium shot of pigeonholes (), and the camera tracks right to reveal the doorway and Xiao Dou stamping letters to be delivered (). There's a 90-degree cut to the hero, now very frontal in a classic planimetric image (). The scene depends partly on suspense; he's setting aside a particular letter but doesn't want her to observe him. So when we get the reverse shot of the woman (), handled as a 180-degree cut, with her looking at the camera, he can't search for the letter. As she resumes her work, cut 180 degrees to reveal the woman in profile in the foreground, in a layered planimetric composition (). Another 180-degree cut puts us behind him and sets her in the background as she rises (). Cut again 180 degrees (). After unpacking a fresh roll of toilet paper, the woman moves

fig. 15.

fig. 16.

fig. 17.

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fig. 18.

fig. 19

fig. 20.

fig. 21.to the background and then off left (), leaving him alone. He Jianjun has saved this moment for the scene's first close-up, when Xiao Dou pulls the letter from the bag () and the camera tilts up to his face (). The scene ends with a setup repeating that seen in, as he stamps the letter ().

The abrupt switches of orientation have activated all sides of the post office's sorting area, which is throughout the film treated as a cluster of boxlike spaces. The location is much more gridlike than that seen elsewhere in the film. Still, He Jianjun also relies on 180-degree cuts to offer contrasting views of the bedrooms at home. He treats the central dining table as a pivot permitting cuts showing one room occupied by his sister's boyfriend, the other to Xiao Dou himself.

In Chen Kaige's *King of the Children* (1988), the planimetric image is put into dialogue, we might say, with quite

different ways of representing space. Any film

fig. 22.

fig. 23.

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fig. 24.

fig. 25.with a schoolroom scene commonly uses a perpendicular shot, for that's the most informative way to show what's on the blackboard. But Chen extends this strategy to filming the schoolhouse itself, turning it into narrow strips of color and texture: windows which compare the teacher to the graffito depicting him, blocks of earth and wood which change color at different times of the day, compositions emphasizing the looming thatch roof the bare ochre earth stretching up to the school. It seems to me that Chen uses this device expressively, when he wants to isolate Lao Gar or emphasize his solitary mission. Against this is set at least three other visual strategies: a more conventional use of depth staging within the schoolroom when the class is present; a use of light and setting to block key items of information (the unseen Lao Gar when the team leader assigns him to the school in the first scene; the use of the thatched roof edge to conceal faces; and of course the expressive, evenexpressionistic landscapes rendered in rich depth. Stylistically, Chen has always seemed quite pluralistic, and in *King of the Children*, he blends the planimetric image with a wide range of techniques.

I wish I could trace, or even sketch, a causal story showing how the planimetric shot came to be a prime option for ambitious mainland filmmakers. Perhaps Chen and his peers saw European films while studying at the film academy. Or perhaps they were drawn to the image through the concrete demands of production practices. In Europe, the growing prevalence of the long lens, squeezing space into a set of sliced planes and pushing toward a frontality of staging, alerted filmmakers to the possibilities of the planimetric image.[17]The same process may have been at work among Mainland filmmakers. Recall, for instance, the centrality of very long lenses in Chen's *The Big Parade* (1985), which stacks faces and bodies in layers that look as thin as cardboard. And there may be still other factors at work. What seems to me undeniable is the fact of convergence, the development in different cultures of a remarkably similar way of constructing space for the viewer, and this convergence may be more than accidental; it may point toward broader areas of transcultural stylistic practice.

Just as important in the festival circuit have been the successive waves of the Taiwanese New Cinema, from the early 1980s to the present. Indeed, here the idea of a festival circuit takes on particular importance, for relatively few of these films receive mainstream theatrical distribution in the West. As if in defiance of Hollywood's "intensified continuity," many Taiwanese films of the 1990s rely on unusually long, often quite static takes. Some researchers have claimed that the long take is a distinctive long-standing tradition of Chinese cinema, but I can't find evidence for this; the 1930s and 1940s films I've checked yield a range of shot lengths about equal to that we find in other national cinemas of the sound era, including that of the US.

[17] See *On the History of Film Style*, 261-63.

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Certainly, however, what we find in contemporary Taiwanese cinema is sharply different from current mainstream practices. Just to take some instances from the 1990s, Yang's *Confucian Confusion* (1994) has an average shot length of 48 seconds, *Vive l'amour:* 36 seconds; *Heartbreak Island* (1995), 52 seconds; *Sweet Degeneration* (197), 40 seconds; *Murmur of Youth* (1997), 34 seconds; and *The Hole* (1998), 53 seconds. For the most part, these films continue to rely on norms of continuity, but in a fairly sparse and selective way. A scene might present only one fairly simple cut-in, or only a pair of shot/ reverse-shot cuts, making fairly singular devices of what are normally seen in much more abundance and which usually carry the burden of ongoing spatial construction.

As with the planimetric image, these long takes aren't completely without precedent or parallel; in Angelopoulos and several Japanese filmmakers, we find shots of comparable duration. What stands out for the student of international film style, it seems to me, is the way in which the initial decision to use a long take yields particular staging strategies. And these strategies have obliged many Taiwanese filmmakers to exploit cinematic resources which have been all but forgotten in the West. Here there can be no question of the influence of one tradition on another; it is, I'll try to show, a matter of two filmmaking traditions, separated by sixty years and half a world, confronting certain constraints built into cinema as a representational technology.

From 1908 to around 1920, while the continuity style was being formed, filmmakers in Germany, France, Italy, and Scandinavia developed rich and subtle patterns of staging within the sustained long shot. Now a student of poetics can't but be struck by the correspondences between this tradition and several films from Taiwan in the 1980s and 1990s. To understand how, we need to examine some fundamental features of cinematic representation. If the playing space of proscenium theatre constitutes a wide but shallow area, the playing space of cinema constitutes a narrowly tapering triangle. This is because of the laws of optics, as light rays focus on a camera lens.

Filmmakers of the 1910s drew a crucial lesson from this trapezoidal playing area. Theatre staging must be broad and lateral, to allow for many sightlines, but film staging had to be narrow and in depth, since the only eye that mattered was that of the camera. Directors learned that one could use this fixed eye creatively. A scene could unfold with precise blocking and revelation of important material--a choreography based not only on figures moving around the frame but of figures and objects impeding our view of some things until the precise moment.[18] For example, in Yevgenii Bauer's *The Revolutionary* (1917), our view of a family at the breakfast table changes slightly as different people become important in the scene, and the table's samovar and the foreground uncle block our view of the daughter at strategic moments ().

To this day, the visual trapezoid defines the cinematic playing space, but the rise of editing and camera movement in the late 1910s somewhat disguised this fact, since those techniques allowed the filmmaker to create an ever-changing arena for the drama. As a result, staging within the static frame became more and more a lost art; very few directors today could imagine staging the scene as Bauer did (though, with reflex viewing, it would be much easier today).

One director who could actualize this option, however, is Hou Hsiao-hsien, who makes virtuoso use of precision staging. Again and again, Hou daringly opens up small slices of space and then tucks important story information into them. In *City of Sadness*, the soldiers come to the Lin home looking for Wen-heung, and Grandfather Lin meets them in a dark chiaroscuro frame, soon joined by Mio in frame center. Thereafter, the soldiers' search in the

family's quarters takes place in a fractional aperture in the distant middle left, reactivated when Mio leaves the center and goes to the rear--Grandfather having obligingly moved aside

[18] For a discussion of precision staging in early film, see ibid., 174-98.

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fig. 26.

fig. 27.

fig. 28.to make her exit visible. Grandfather Lin resumes arguing with the official, stepping to the left to bring his silhouette into the aperture and blocking the action in the rear, but then moving aside once more as action develops in the distance. (Hou has even moved the officer from frame right to frame center, making him block the potentially distracting colored glass.) Hou gives us opacity on two levels: the foreground conversation takes place in near-silhouette, with the officer occasionally blocking the father; and in the distance, an important action is so minute as to be barely discernible.

We can get a concise sense of Hou's reactivation of principles of precision staging by considering what's been called the "dinner-table conundrum." Western filmmakers are anxious to avoid shooting scenes involving people arrayed on all sides of a circular or rectangular table. There are problems of continuity, keeping track of eyelines, gestures, and props (partly eaten food and partly empty glasses). But as Bauer's scene in *The Revolutionary* shows, the tradition of precision staging could modulate dinner table encounters through deft deployment of the blocking and revealing yielded by the camera's cyclopean view.

Hou in effect reinvents the strategy. In one scene of *City of Sadness*, as the intellectuals are gathered around the table, slight movements of foreground figures (turned from us) and background figures (facing us) create fluctuating centers of interest (), culminating in the opening of the window onto the city as they sing (). Another scene, in which Wen-heung meets with the Shanghai gangster family, depends on minimal movement of his foreground figure and slight turning of the gangsters' heads to direct our attention to one face rather than another ().

So it seems that the rise of the long-take trend in Taiwanese cinema, combined with an unbudging camera, stimulated filmmakers to cultivate skills which have all but vanished in the West. But what led so many directors to adopt the long-take option in the first place? Probably several factors were at work. Distant long takes permit greater economy in shooting; with careful rehearsal, less film is used--a precious commodity for low-budget filmmaking in the 1980s. 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.[19]Perhaps too this style was embraced as a very evident way of deliberately distinguishing the new Taiwanese cinema from its commercial competition. (A

[19] "The Sandwich Man," *Monthly Film Bulletin* 653 (June 1988): 164.

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fig. 29.

fig. 30.

fig. 31.

fig. 32.

fig. 33.

fig. 34.

fig. 35.friend of mine likes to say that Taiwanese art films are everything that Hong Kong films aren't--slow, subtle, and suggestive.) In sum, the sources of this aesthetic strategy are doubtless local and contingent; but the visual forms it takes work transculturally. Once filmmakers are committed to the long fixed take, the optical constraints of cinematic representation make precision staging a very salient way to develop a scene dramatically, and once the filmmaker sees the rich possibilities of precision staging, it becomes a goal to be pursued for its own sake--no longer a byproduct of a constraint, but a source of delicacy, suspense, surprise, and other artistic effects.
Chinese cinema of the 1980s and 1990s, then, offers a paradigm of three principal ways in which international trends can shape national film traditions. First there

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are widespread conventions, as in the influence of international continuity norms upon the popular cinema of Hong Kong. The distinctiveness of this cinema handily reminds us that being influenced is not a passive matter; artists seize on what's available to them, transforming it, making it their own, subordinating it to their purposes. Hong Kong's version of intensified continuity is not a simple copy of Hollywood's--indeed, we might consider it an intensification of an intensification, "more Hollywood than Hollywood."
At another level, there may have been some influence of the European art-cinema's planimetric image upon

Mainland filmmakers, perhaps through screenings at the Beijing Film Academy or the circulation of videotapes. But we can entertain another possibility--not influence but a common stylistic striving which led Chinese filmmakers independently to explore the possibilities of this sort of image. Once filmmakers have begun using long lenses, the planimetric image may emerge as a likely compositional device. This suggests that there may be a fairly limited number of basic systems of shooting and staging a scene, and that these are rediscovered and revised at various points in film history.

Our third example offers yet another way in which we can see transcultural stylistic affinities. Doubtless there was no influence, direct or indirect, of Europe's 1910s depth directors upon Hou Hsiao-hsien and his colleagues. Rather, the Taiwanese filmmakers, starting from a similar point of departure--the fixed long take--discovered common features of the medium: the trapezoidal playing space and the opportunities provided by blockage and revelation. They hit on, we might say, similar solutions to a common problem: how to direct attention within the distant, static shot? Of course their reasons for adopting the fixed long take were different from those of Bauer and his contemporaries, but once that path was taken, the visual trapezoid faced both groups of filmakers with the same constraints and opportunities.

How may we best understand these acts of historical agents more abstractly? The angle I've pursued has been not to tie them to an abstract theoretical doctrine (hybridity, creolization, globalization) but to work inductively, from the bottom up, generating concepts specific to the regularities we can detect. The result is perhaps surprising: Not everything of interest about a culture's films is culturally specific ... or even specifically cultural! Put less paradoxically: If we attend to the way films are made, we may be led to study transcultural processes, the sharing of craft decisions and stylistic norms, either by influence or through a common point of departure shaped by craft traditions or the particularities of the medium.

This is not to say that culture plays no role in style, nor even in the particular spatial techniques I've fastened on. It's only to say that culture works with givens: the habits and opportunities provided by craft practice, which may have come from national or international sources; the biases and limits of human perception; the propensities and constraints of the very medium with which artists work. These givens aren't simply raw material, to be wholly absorbed by culture. They leave crucial traces in the very texture of the art work--like the pebbly comma of ink left by one kind of brush in Chinese painting. It's one task of poetics, as I understand it, to call our attention to these textures, to expose and explore a level of artistry which communicates across local barriers. Culture not only divides us; it unites us. Chinese cinema, by becoming a leader in world filmmaking, owes its energy not only to national and regional traditions but to the sheer power of film in the handsof creative artists. The triumphs of Chinese filmmaking remind us of the manifold powers of cinema: an art at once deeply tied to local cultural dynamics and yet nonetheless able to move and astonish anyone who has the eyes to see.

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END

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