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BY J. HOBERMAN

Summer at Grandpa's

CHILDHOOD'S END: THE FILMS OF HOU HSIAO-HSIEN. Four films directed by Hou Hsiao-hsien. At the Asia Society. July 9, 16, 23, and 30.

KARMA. Directed and produced by Ho Quang Minh. Written by Ho and Nguy Ngu, from Nguy's short story "The Wounded Beast." At Film Forum 1, through July 21.

Hou's characters are often in transition—the train station is an image in virtually all of his films. But *Summer at Grandpa's* (1984; July 16 at 7 and July 30 at 3) reverses his usual trajectory. Their mother in the hospital, two small children of the urban middle class are sent to stay with their grandfather, a rural doctor. The mood is set when the boy trades his remote control toy car for another kid's turtle. (As a result, the house is besieged by children bearing turtles in hopes of making the same deal.) Filled with scenes of playing and swimming, *Summer at Grandpa's* is the most bucolic of Hou's films—as well as the one in which, from just beyond the frame, sex and death cast the darkest shadows. Hou manages the difficult task of maintaining a child's point of view without ever seeming cute or unduly nostalgic. At one point, grandfather recites a poem suggesting that the children are not simply strangers from the city, but exiles in adulthood's foreign land.

This sense of uprootedness is part of Hou's particular modernity—indeed, one could argue that it's precisely his evocation of displacement that moves him from the provincial margins of the industrial world toward its emotional center. Colonized by Japan for the first half of the century, peopled by political exiles and their children since 1949, Taiwan has been described to me as "a temporary country"; Hou makes it seem at once familiar and alien, as much to his characters as to the viewer. All but becalmed, Hou's protagonists float toward an uncertain, never articulated future; beneath them courses an undercurrent of violent upheaval. The Chinese revolution is the absence that structures Hou's work—his placid, melancholy Taiwan is the eye of history's storm.

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