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HEADLINE: A camera quietly trained on eternal truths INTERVIEW **HOU HSIAO-HSIEN:** On the surface, little happens. Yet the Taiwanese director's films illuminate profound human themes. He tells Nigel Andrews about eastern and western approaches to storytelling

BODY:

Afilm festival is like an art gallery. As you move past the exhibits, or they move past you, some leap out to seize your interest, some arouse no response at all, some please, some displease, and some - often the best and most enduring, the ones that mystify a little before showing their magic - make you think: "I'll come back to that later."

The Taiwanese filmmaker **Hou Hsiao-Hsien** has been having this effect for 25 years. His City of Sadness (1989), a dense but extraordinary historical movie that won the Golden Lion at Venice, was the first Chinese-language art film to become an international hit. This year's Cannes entry Three Times - a jewelled enigma about love and time - won a special tribute from the Golden Palm-winning Dardenne brothers, who called Hou their mentor. This week the Tokyo-set Cafe Lumiere, premiered at Venice and made in centenary homage to Yasujiro Ozu, Japanese cinema's great domestic miniaturist, opens in London.

For newcomers there are two facts - or runic wisdoms - about Hou Hsiao-Hsien's films. One: nothing happens in them. Two: everything happens in them. Look at Cafe Lumiere. Its themes include art, life, death, love, parenthood and national identity. Yet its plot is an unassertive meander about a Japanese girl (Yo Hitoto), pregnant by a now-discarded Taiwanese boyfriend, who strikes up a friendship with a young bookshop-owner (Tadanobu Asano) obsessed with studying the Tokyo rail network. No less geekily - yet no less illuminatingly, as Hou treats it - the girl is researching the music of a dead Taiwan-born composer.

The labyrinths all link up and the film is ultimately as diffuse as a laser beam. Yet when I met Hou on a Venice hotel terrace, on a Mediterranean evening as lambent as one of his films, my first question was: why does he make his stories so opaque? So seemingly actionless? Does this tell us something about eastern versus western sensibilities?

"I spend a lot of time reflecting on the language of cinema," he says. "Recently I read a book by Italo Calvino called Six Lectures on Literature. There's one sentence where he says: 'What is depth in art? Depth is on the surface.' I call this 'traces'. The message of a film comes through the traces left by actions or emotions. Cinema has this unique potential to convey meanings beyond words."

I point out the wonderful - to me - contrariness of two scenes in Cafe Lumiere. At key moments of self-

exposure, when the heroine tells first her parents and later her friend that she is pregnant, we do not even see her face. Her back is turned in one scene. In another she is momentarily obscured on a busy street.

"I once met Akira Kurosawa and he said he was impressed, or bewildered, that in my films you often have some outside characters walking in front of the camera and obstructing the view of the main characters. This is heresy in mainstream cinema or Hollywood cinema! But it is partly the difference between east and west. For instance in Peking Opera you have a completely abstract stage, with no sets, so that everything is expressed through the movement of actors."

There is another reason why Hou often keeps his camera at a distance. It goes back to his beginnings as a director. And it pinpoints the difference between Hou's cinema and Ozu's. "Ozu worked in a studio, during a very flourishing period for Japanese cinema. He had his own family of actors. When I started filming in the late 1970s, Taiwan cinema was quite unstable. You had to film outside studios, because there were no studios. And there were very few good actors, so I had to work with non-professionals or friends. Since these people weren't trained, you couldn't move the camera right in front of their faces. The only way to overcome this was to have the camera at a distance."

Today that sequestered lens, prying into present reality as if spying on

the eternal, is a signature Hou trope.

It is the perfect device for a cinema that in film after film - from his semi-autobiographical A Time to Live and a Time to Die (invoking his troubled childhood with an ailing father and suicidal mother, and the lasting sense of displacement felt by a refugee family from mainland China) to the delicate density of City of Sadness - insists that the personal story runs parallel with larger social or historical perspectives.

The railway network in Cafe Lumiere, with its mad but orderly arabesques, could be an image of Hou's cinema. Only this degree of complexity can deal with Taiwan's own history

of serial ownership and interlinked

destiny.

"My father moved to Taiwan in

1947 to work there, but after 1949, when Chiang Kai Shek and the Nationalists moved in, we couldn't go back. Taiwan has always been an immigration

society. It started early in the 1600s when Holland occupied it, then Spain; later Japan and China. It was always a place where outside forces came in one after the other. There has always been this feeling of instability, of chaos waiting to happen."

Yet the three stories in Hou's Cannes-premiered Three Times show that some things remain constant - such as the pain of love - in widely sundered decades (1966, 1911, 2005). And the plot and themes of CafeLumiere, which echoes its Taiwanese-Japanese co-production origin by meditating on the relationship between separate cultures, muse obliquely on an ideal world in which that separation would not exist. Could such a world - or such an Asia - come about? Could cinema help it to?

"There are two sides to this question. One is financial. A single country can no longer finance a good film. It's quite usual to have one actor each from, say, Taiwan, Hong Kong and China, and to shoot in each place. That way you easily find the money and also attract the public if you've got favourite stars from each place.

"So on the one hand you have this convergence, with many people, including artists, having this vision of a new 'union of Asia'. On the other hand many of these nations have a heritage of rule by European powers, and when those powers left, the countries inherited their philosophies of nationhood. It's very difficult to move beyond that today, to break down national borders. As you in modern Europe are discovering! But it is for cinema always to keep trying . . . "

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