

## Pictorial Storytelling and Staging in Ann Hui's *The Way We Are*

Gary Bettinson



Critical writing has generally ignored the visual dimension of Ann Hui's cinema. Even frankly laudatory accounts of Hui's work – which rightly applaud its social purpose, ethico-political value, and dedication to Hong Kong's marginalized sites of destitution and impoverishment – tend either to disregard visual style or to characterize it in only the vaguest terms.<sup>1</sup> By virtue of sheer omission, critics all but concede that Hui's achievement lies elsewhere than in visual expression. What accounts for this critical dismissal of Hui's film style? One explanation lies in the persistent view that Hui's movies, for all their thematic unity, lack stylistic coherence. They also purportedly lack perceptual salience. To the extent that Hui possesses a visual signature, it is 'invisible,' 'transparent,' 'imperceptible,' 'self-effacing' – and hence, it would seem, apt to be overlooked.<sup>2</sup> Then there is the director's own appraisal of her film style, which seems only to have cemented the critical consensus. Her characteristic remarks ('I have not been innovative in terms of film language or technique;' 'I still don't feel that I really have a distinctive cinematic style') have hardly encouraged critics to probe her films' visual strategies.<sup>3</sup> All of this is to say that Hui's auteurist reputation derives not from an identifiable set of visual traits, and still less from a palpable mastery of cinematic technique. And yet, I hope to demonstrate, Hui's approach to pictorial design displays considerable prowess. By focusing in particular on her tactics of figure staging

(operating in concert with other visual parameters), I want to suggest that Hui's deceptively 'unassuming' aesthetic contributes greatly to the power and value of her work.





My purpose in this article is not to promote Hui as a trailblazer of film style. But I do aim to show that by slighting Hui's visual narration, critics have neglected a major aspect of how these films create meaning, guide the spectator's activity, and harbor dramatic force. If we are to avoid reducing Hui's cinema to a posse of favorite themes (migration and exile, cultural memory and amnesia, humanism and feminism, societal oppression, filial responsibility, pre-handover anomie and so forth), we need to examine Hui's reliance on, and proficiency in, pictorial storytelling. This article attempts a modest first step in this direction. Focusing centrally on *The Way We Are* (2008), I shall try to demonstrate the subtlety and sophistication of Hui's visual sense, the discreet means by which it conjures not only thematic meaning but also a host of narrational and rhetorical effects.



Why is *The Way We Are* germane to this endeavor? Not least because much of its action is expressed visually. Embracing a rhetoric of minimalism, Hui seeks to funnel story events through visual means whenever possible. In a film purged of dramatic fillips and crescendos, visual interest becomes a crucial tool for maintaining viewer engagement. Just as important, the film's minimalist reduction of dialogue places a high burden on editing, camerawork, mise-en-scène, and nonverbal performance – that is, the overarching visual narration – to convey character traits, narrative information, and thematic implication. Much of *The Way We Are*'s dramatic potency, its quiet yet captivating power, is achieved largely

through visual cues. Thus Hui's film compels us to consider its visual design both as a vessel of narrative meaning and as a stylistic system shaping the viewer's experience.<sup>4</sup>

In particular, *The Way We Are* promotes figure staging to a major principle of visual design. Since the film's minimalist approach manifests a tendency toward fairly long takes and inert framings, Hui is obliged to create and sustain visual interest through the choreography of bodies within the fixed frame. For this reason, it is hard to countenance Mirana M. Szeto's contention that *The Way We Are* 'is absolutely devoid of mise-en-scène' (2011: 63), for although Szeto reasonably aims to capture the film's apparent rejection of artifice, she overlooks its intricate, purposive staging of figures within the frame.<sup>5</sup> Hui makes blocking a key expressive resource. Not every shot in *The Way We Are* adopts a tableau aesthetic (immobile camera; distant framing; extended duration) and not all of Hui's staging techniques can lay claim to novelty (diagonal and triangular formations yield foreground-background interplay and animate familiar schemas of blocking and revealing).





But by tracing her staging patterns and their discrete functions, we shall see that Hui proves remarkably adept at positioning and maneuvering figures around the frame, modulating centers of interest within a visual array, and hinting at story developments not articulated by the film's taciturn protagonists.

These staging patterns unfold within a pared-down mode of storytelling. Stylistically, the film's editing rate is more deliberate, its camera movements more sparing, than we might

expect from a Hong Kong drama of the fledgling 2000s. (Its average shot length of 16.4 seconds is sluggish compared to many Hong Kong films of the period.<sup>6</sup>) *The Way We Are* employs facial close-ups (CUs), but rarely.



Scarcer still are optical point-of-view (POV) shots. Instead, the film favors long shots, *plans américains*, and prolonged takes (even, occasionally, sequence shots) – hence the need to dynamize the visual field through mobile staging, varied camera setups, a piecemeal disclosure of dramatic space, and other subtly arresting tactics.



Not that the film's minimalist impulse is confined to the image track: characteristically, Hui dovetails visual style with story and genre. Just as *The Way We Are* streamlines stylistic discourse, so it attenuates plot: instead of fraught conflicts and revelations, the action dwells in the domain of the everyday, the humdrum minutia of ordinary life. Ostensibly a melodrama, the film flouts the hyperbole and theatricality ingredient to this genre. Its expository setup might prime us to expect the flaunting of feverish passions – tempestuous liaisons, generational conflict, fatal illnesses, emotional catharsis, bathos – yet Hui dangles no romantic prospects before the widowed protagonists (Kwai and Granny), nor does she tap the melodramatic heroine's hysteria and histrionics.



She also eschews filial conflict and deflects sentimentality. The film's emotional resonance springs rather from a rhetoric of restraint, a controlled dampening down of melodrama's emotionally charged appeals. Then there is the tempering of Hui's authorial motifs. Contra her purported lack of a consistent auteur style, Hui's oeuvre does exhibit some recurring stylistic tendencies – unmotivated camera movements; prominently placed mirrors; subjective imagery; voiceover narration – but *The Way We Are* pointedly subdues or strips away these signature devices.



In all, Hui treats *The Way We Are* as an occasion for aesthetic economy. ‘Instead of adding more things,’ she has remarked of the film, ‘I sort of subtracted’ (Phathanavirangoon 2009). But she seems also to have actively pursued a stylistic challenge born of self-imposed constraints. If the plot is wispy, if genre norms are diluted, and if visual presentation verges

on the austere, how to elicit and sustain narrative interest? Hui finds various solutions to this problem, among them a strategic play with the viewer's expectations, steering hypotheses awry; and a kind of intrinsic pluralism, integrating different stylistic approaches and methods of filmmaking. To both strategies, staging will prove instrumental. We might say that Hui's staging 'compensates' for the film's reduction of standard resources of style and story (such as frequent close-ups, brisk cutting, and dialogue). Or, put differently, a film that minifies certain aspects of its style (again, close framings, dynamic editing) invariably requires other stylistic elements (in this case, staging) to become more 'active' than usual, perhaps even 'maximalized': the onus falls on such elements to seize and steer the viewer's attention, and to discharge a range of other storytelling duties. This aesthetic approach, exemplified by *The Way We Are*, not only demands an attentive spectator; it also creates a deceptively dense visual texture rich in subtlety, nuance, and emotion.

### **Staging the primacy effect**

A crisp prologue to *The Way We Are* demonstrates how Hui combines cinematic staging with techniques less characteristic of the film as a whole – facial close-ups, energetic cinematography – in order to execute a host of expository functions. In the process, Hui demonstrates mastery of an idiom she is seldom recognized for: the revelation of 'pure cinema,' the propensity to carpenter stretches of action chiefly by visual means.

An oblique, dorsal CU of an unindividuated figure (whom retrospectively we infer is the female protagonist Kwai [Paw Hee-ching], departing her flat) starts the 'plot' in motion.



The sound of the door clanking behind her provides a sonic bridge to a profiled medium CU of On (Leung Chun-lung), Kwai's adolescent son. The boy languishes somnolently in bed, clutching a pillow.



Cut to a new locale: the backroom bowels of the supermarket where Kwai works as a vendor. An opaque curtain, flanked by columns of lockers, is drawn aside by Kwai – a somewhat theatrical staging gambit that unveils our protagonist, this time perspicuously.



On the shop floor, Kwai ferries weighty boxes of durian to and fro.



A repeated panning gesture, mechanically tracing Kwai's back-and-forth trajectory, gently underscores the suggestion of laborious routine. An elliptical cut, meanwhile, amplifies the heroine's vigorous work rate. Sans dialogue, Hui's visual tactics shoulder the task of character exposition: with deft economy, Kwai is established as purposeful, indefatigable, and hardworking.

The narration cuts back to On, still lying motionless.



He stirs and sits up listlessly. An ellipsis conveys him to the apartment's sofa, on which he adopts another sedentary position.



By now it is apparent that Hui, by means of parallel editing, wants us to measure the differences between Kwai and On: the mother's tireless industry versus the son's perpetual torpor. This narrative juxtaposition is reinforced by the prologue's stylistic workings. Unlike the supermarket action, the shots of On contain very little movement. When he lounges on the couch in medium shot, the camera remains static: Hui disdains a change of angle or of shot scale, the extended take (twenty-three seconds) – and the stasis of and within the frame – accentuating On's inertia. And unlike its function in the supermarket action, ellipticality here serves not to quicken the drama's tempo, but to implicate On in long passages of *temps mort*. By the time the juxtaposed action lines converge, the prologue's elliptical cuts will have toggled through Kwai's entire workday, the duration of which On idles away in relative immobility. Here again Hui relies upon the image track to mobilize the primacy effect – that is, the initial process whereby spectators ascribe traits to characters – though, as we will shortly see, Hui's tricky narration cheats our expectations, eliciting a judgment of On that proves wide of target.

The prologue's visual narration pursues other effects. Again and again, the sequence teases us with erroneous hints that On is about to launch into purposeful action. Supine on the

sofa, the youth languidly lifts a dumbbell (a comical gesture of physical exertion, belied by the boy's stagnation), only for an ellipsis to find him once again dead asleep.



Now, awakened, he tardily rises and traipses offscreen, before shuffling back to the couch – toting his cherished pillow – to resume his slumber.



Intercut with mobile shots of Kwai at the supermarket...



...On is then shown in stationary medium shot, robotically brushing his teeth in the bathroom mirror (thereby continuing the prologue's emphasis on nonverbal, procedural action).<sup>7</sup>



A subsequent shot reveals On's ambulation to be yet another false start: the youth has repaired to the sofa and lapsed into a deep sleep.



The sequence wrings humor out of On's lethargy, creating a comic effect through visual stratagems. When On ambles offscreen to retrieve a pillow, Hui's camera neither pans (or tracks) to trace his path nor cuts to the space he now occupies. Rather, the medium-long shot remains trained on the vacant couch.



Now, as On ambles back into frame, plops down on the couch, and nestles into the pillow, Hui permits the shot to linger longer than necessary – the better to emphasize On’s utter inertia, his habitual passivity.



Much of the humor results from Hui’s tactics of staging and shooting. By orchestrating an unwavering long take (twenty-eight seconds), the deadpan fixity of the camera, and repetitive figure staging (On’s chronic horizontality), Hui conjures a vividly amusing portrait of teenage sloth.

On finally rouses when Kwai returns home from work. Crosscutting has so far governed the prologue's narration, alternating between stylistic 'energy' (Kwai's line of action) and visual stasis (On's line of action). But now that the action lines intersect, Hui lets the static style dominate. A locked-down camera observes Kwai entering the apartment in long shot.



Hui maneuvers the two protagonists around the fixed frame, and ushers them into offscreen niches of the apartment (the kitchen, the bathroom).



Notably the pair says not a word to each other. Another ellipsis yields a slight reframing, as Kwai and On share a meal together around a circular dining table.<sup>8</sup>



Eventually, a terse and ostensibly trivial dialogue exchange breaks the silence (and inaugurates a recurring newspaper motif). Kwai asks, ‘Did you buy today’s paper?’ On replies: ‘No, I didn’t go out.’ In silence they continue eating.

Hui's prologue has delivered a compact model of pure cinema. Almost devoid of dialogue, the sequence delineates the drama visually, establishing the film's primary locales (the apartment, the supermarket), contrasting the protagonists, hinting at routinized existence, and generating humor. To a large extent, the prologue serves as a microcosm of strategies upon which the film will expand: apart from the visual articulation of everyday rituals, of characterization, and of (what we might call) quotidian comedy, the prologue also coaxes us to form misguided inferences. As noted above, the primacy effect cues us to misjudge On. The teenager's apparent proclivity to loll in bed all day (amplified by the interwoven scenes stressing Kwai's productivity), his glum laconicism, the working-class milieu in which he resides (an impersonal housing estate located in crime-ridden Tin Shui Wai) – all these details prompt us to peg On as a soporific wastrel, a delinquent youth in the mold of the *ah fei* archetype found in countless heroic bloodshed sagas.<sup>9</sup>





That On and Kwai speak hardly at all, moreover, augurs a melodramatic story centered on generational conflict and juvenile deviancy. Ultimately *The Way We Are* will subvert these assumptions, gradually revealing On to be not workshy but dutiful, kind-hearted, and gentle. Not for the last time, the film's visual narration arouses our expectations only to scotch them.

Subsequently, Hui's pictorial schemas operate to qualify the primacy effect. Immediately following the prologue, Kwai and On attend a birthday celebration held in honor of Kwai's mother. A leisurely close-up 'single' of On launches the scene.



There follows a medium shot of Kwai seated alone at a table, the wider framing specifying the setting: a restaurant interior.



In the mid-ground, a child moves rightward, revealing On frontally seated in deep space.



This blocking-and-revealing gambit, which accentuates the physical distance between the two protagonists, reinforces the lack of intimacy limned in the prologue: why, we ask, do they sit alone instead of together? The next phase of the scene orients the action around Kwai: in a string of static shots, she provides spatial anchoring as family relatives drift in and out of frame. A wide shot tucks Kwai into the right edge of the image, while assorted relatives consort in the background.



Here Hui's scenographic design connotes Kwai's emotional isolation – as Gina Marchetti observes, Kwai seems 'out of place' in this family environment (2015: 248) – before the camera tracks forward, homing in on Kwai's relations. One cadre of kinsfolk engaged in a mah-jong game summons Kwai to the table.



When their conversation turns to On, Kwai describes her son as 'lazy.' Kwai's explicitly spoken dialogue would seem to compound the prologue's primacy effect, but the restaurant scene's stylistic presentation will function contrapuntally, implicitly hinting that our initial judgment of On (though founded on compelling textual cues) may be faulty.

Kwai's remark cues a reprise of the CU shot of On, still stationed at the opposite side of the restaurant floor.



Nearby, his younger cousins play cards at a table. Hui thus sets up a parallel situation: the middle-aged people playing mah-jong on one side of the room, the younger generation playing cards on the other. And just as Kwai, at the outset of the scene, is spatially detached from her relatives, so On sits apart from his peers. Hui arrays the children frontally and laterally across the shot's foreground, with On visible in a background niche. Now On stands and moves toward his cousins, apparently angling to be invited into the fold.



But the westernized youngsters – nattily dressed, and inferably more affluent than their lonesome counterpart – ignore him. Dejected, On retreats back into the distance, and sinks forlornly into his chair.



As in the scene's earlier framing of Kwai, Hui recruits staging to emphasize On's isolation from his well-heeled kin. In other words, Hui obliquely aligns Kwai and On in their solitude: as Sebastian Veg puts it, the scene presents 'mother and son...as the poor relations' (2014: 86).

Soon Hui sets the youth on a trajectory across the room. Extending the scene's penchant for depth staging, On strolls from a midground plane of space into a profiled medium CU, his course traced by a static unbroken shot.



Casually, On sits down in the chair vacated by Kwai, thereby supplanting Kwai spatially.



Hui thus posits a spatial alignment between Kwai and On. Already the prologue's primacy effect is being subtly renovated: if the prologue served to stress the protagonists' differences, the restaurant scene tacitly underscores their affinities. A few short scenes later, the pair will be graphically aligned again, when On replaces Kwai spatially and compositionally at the dining table.



In both instances, the protagonists' likeness is evoked nonverbally (and on occasion, as we have noted, in contradistinction to the dialogue track), through staging, framing, and physical action. Presently I will suggest that Hui's unemphatic visual narration hints not only at character affinities, but more broadly at a theme of generational congruence – a topos given concrete expression in another key sequence from early in the film.

This sequence depicts a Christian fellowship seminar, attended by scores of uniformed youths. Among them is On, comically ill at ease. A chirpy team leader posits a scenario – how would each youngster react to their mother assigning them chores? – and solicits a roundtable response from the group.



Amid a volley of recalcitrant replies, On's answer stands out as anomalous: 'Okay,' he repeats monosyllabically, indicating ready compliance to the hypothetical parental injunction. So much for generational antagonism. Indeed, Hui reveals the seminar's topic of familial conflict to be ironically inapplicable to On, whose relationship with Kwai is devoid of animus. In so doing, Hui further erodes a melodramatic trope latent within the film's prologue: domestic tumult.

Not least, the fellowship scene functions to deepen our understanding of On.<sup>10</sup> The seminar now over, the youths mingle freely. Kei, a surly boy previously seen reacting with disdain to On's affirmation of filial piety, defiantly espouses familial rebellion.



Here Hui stresses the two boys' differences by means of blocking, framing, and performance. A spacious medium shot sprinkles several youths horizontally across the foreground, their backs turned away from camera; these figures effectively flank On and Kei, both of whom acquire salience through centering and frontality.



Hui juxtaposes the boys through physical and compositional similarity. In what amounts to a two-shot, their superficial likeness is laid bare: roughly the same age and height, they sport similar shoulder-length hair, and dress identically in sky-blue missionary shirts. Yet Kei,

contorting his face into a mask of contempt, snarls, 'I hate my mom,' while On stands placidly beside him, facially opaque. (Here is another conduit for Hui's minimalist program: both Leung Chun-lung as On and Paw Hee-ching as Kwai cleave to an introverted, physically impassive performance style.) If Hui contrasts the boys' miens by pairing them within the same frame, she then underscores their dissimilarities by means of counterposed (if not quite successive) CU singles, in which each youth addresses the camera in turn.<sup>11</sup> Again, the insolent boy launches an invective against his mother.



On, by contrast, insists that his own maternal relationship poses 'no problem.'



Hui employs both of these visual tactics – the de facto two-shot and the address to camera – in order to contrast the boys’ disparate attitudes and dispositions, the better to lay bare On’s temperate personality traits and to qualify the primacy effect: On, we now see, is neither a hostile delinquent nor estranged from his mother. (Later, his rambunctious pals gently tease him for being ‘a good boy.’) The brattish Kei, meanwhile, embodies the sort of undesirable traits we have mistakenly, albeit tentatively, ascribed to On.

The next phase of story action will reify the hypothetical premise rehearsed in the missionary seminar. Across a string of scenes, Kwai showers On with demands: tidy away garments from a clothesline, go to the shopping mall, install a television set, buy a lightbulb. At each injunction, On dutifully follows orders. Gradually the contours of his relationship with Kwai crystallize. The film reveals their contentedness with simple pleasures: both characters, above all, take pleasure in preparing and eating meals together.



Though they often sit in silence, their reticence betokens not familial estrangement but easy familiarity. Hui's visual narration substitutes for demonstrative displays of affection, as when a steadily advancing camera – closing in on the pair as they carve open a durian – culminates in an intimate two-shot.



More broadly, Kwai and On's laconic mode of communication is ideally represented by the film's predominantly sparse style. (As typical of Hui's oeuvre, *The Way We Are* fits style to story.) Additionally, rhyming staging and echoic actions emphasize On's strong parallels to

Kwai. We have already mentioned the strategy of spatial alignment. Other parallels coalesce too: a funeral scene confers graphic likenesses upon the pair, as Kwai's profiled position, bowed posture, and black attire is closely mirrored by On, centrally placed behind Kwai in a background wedge.<sup>12</sup>



And then there is the rhyming action of slicing fruit. In the prologue, Kwai prises open a durian...



...in reel four, On enlists Kwai's aid to separate a durian...



...and by the final reel, On proves capable of cleaving fruit by himself.



Such moments wallow in mundane minutiae, but they also prompt us to perceive the central relationship in terms of instruction and imitation. The nurturing Kwai trains her son in practical matters by doing and demonstrating; On docilely observes, emulates, and learns. No less important, Kwai embodies a moral standard for her son to follow. Altruistic, compassionate, and conscientious, Kwai offers On a vivid example of personal and civic responsibility. On may be directionless, but he emulates his mother's kindness. *The Way We*

*Are* thereby puts forth and espouses an ethics of human behavior. Out of the protagonists' symbiotic relationship, moreover, springs the film's distinctive central theme: intergenerational harmony and the continuity of tradition, lineage, and custom. In foregrounding unity among the generations, *The Way We Are* departs not only from the tropes of classical Hollywood melodrama (think of the generational ruptures dramatized in *Stella Dallas* [1937], *Imitation of Life* [1959], and *Rebel Without a Cause* [1955]),<sup>13</sup> but also from Hong Kong's tradition of overdetermined youthpics, fraught with domestic strife and teenage revolt (from *The Teddy Girls* [1969], *The Generation Gap* [1973], and *Father and Son* [1981] to *Made in Hong Kong* [1997] and *Young and Dangerous* [1996]).





*The Way We Are's* thematic of tradition, heritage, and cross-generational empathy is seared into the drama. Kwai inculcates in On not only practical skills but Confucian values: traditional customs and rituals (such as the preparation and consumption of food), and a humanist ethics of behavior, are 'handed down' from one generation to the next. Intergenerational affinities, too, are laid bare by the narrative. When Kwai's mother is hospitalized, On and his teenaged cousin Yee (Yo Yo Fong) frequently visit her. The first of these visits – represented by a sequence shot and enlivened by a repetitive camera pan – shows the ailing woman in ornery temper, but the youths treat her with patience and warmth.



‘We’re family,’ Yee remarks. The next scene depicts Kwai and co-worker Granny (Lai-wun Chan) toiling in the supermarket, talking affectionately about their respective male offspring. (As if to confirm a thematic connection, Hui links these scenes stylistically through the insistent panning device.)





Now Hui cuts back to the kindly teenagers: as On and Yee depart the hospital, we eavesdrop on a conversation which confirms their filial dedication as genuine.



This knot of scenes, like the film at large, swerves from melodramatic formula. By portraying mutual concern among the young, the middle-aged, and the elderly, Hui plays up the similitude rather than the schisms that can exist among generations.

Above all, the film thematizes and affirms familial unity. Kwai seems at first not to care about her mother's illness, but on this score the film has again led us astray. 'I'm your daughter,' she asserts, in a scene that belatedly reveals her actual feelings.



Prima facie, too, Kwai seems detached from her brethren, but late-arriving exposition will amend this faulty inference. (Echoing Yee's sentiment, she tells her siblings: 'We're family.')

And though Kwai's colleague and neighbour, Granny, is cut adrift by her blood relatives, at the climax Kwai and On absorb her into a makeshift family unit.



More broadly, the film extrapolates beyond its localized narrative: Hui treats the theme of familial amity as a microcosm of community. At the epilogue, the film's action fans out to yoke its personal story to the public sphere, a montage of archive stills and documentary images capturing anonymous crowds as they mark the Mid-Autumn festival.



This coda reverberates with the film's wider topoi of pastness, cultural tradition, and civic solidarity.

In sum, Hui finds visual and formal ways to juxtapose and align various generations of Hong Kongers. Echoic staging, pictorial symmetries, spatial alignment, parallel actions, foreground-background interplay, and other tactics underpin a narrative and thematic emphasis on familial stability, cross-generational compassion, and cultural preservation. For Lisa Stokes (2012: 60), Hui's exploration of family dynamics – particularly the relationship between mothers and children – constitutes an authorial signature, while Elaine Yee-lin Ho (2001: 195) locates a thematic concern with 'the endurance in Hong Kong of inherited and quotidian Chinese cultural practices' in Hui's *Summer Snow* (1995).<sup>14</sup> Similarly, *The Way We Are* throws thematic weight on Hong Kong's imperishable cultural mores, rituals, and customs. In the following sections, I shall argue that the film itself preserves and embodies Hong Kong cinema's durable aesthetic traditions. Its visual schemas, masterfully deployed and elaborated by Hui, grow out of long-standing, local principles of staging and shooting. At a period in which critics pronounced the demise or 'disappearance' of Hong Kong cinema, *The Way We Are* exemplifies the resilience both of local filmmakers confronting 'mainlandization,' and of the remarkably fecund body of stylistic norms that shapes their work.

### **Studied spontaneity and actuality staging**

So far I have suggested ways that Hui's visual narration scaffolds – and often propels, in the manner of pure cinema – narrative and thematic meaning. In particular, I have spotlighted several narrational functions to which Hui assigns cinematic staging: the creation of low-key quotidian comedy; the signification of both character affinities (as between Kwai and On) and contrasts (as between On and the recalcitrant schoolboy Kei) in ways that sharpen character exposition and redress a somewhat duplicitous primacy effect; and the fine-grained delineation of trivial everyday routines. We can elaborate this latter function further, for *The Way We Are* presses figure staging quite far into the fiber of the everyday. What scholars have called 'Hui's aesthetics of the quotidian' (Veg 2014: 84) and 'Hui's cinematics of everyday life' (Szeto 2011: 42) – typified by not only *The Way We Are*, but also *Summer Snow*, *Ordinary Heroes* (1999), and *A Simple Life* (2011) – is instantiated to a large degree by

Hui's staging and shooting schemas, the precursors of which can be traced to long-running stylistic traditions within Hong Kong cinema.

Recall the Christian fellowship scene. At the level of visual rhetoric, the scene self-consciously emulates documentary stylistics. As the assembled youths conduct a roundtable debate, skittish handheld camerawork and jerky panning motions maintain an illusion of authenticity, seeming to catch action on the fly. When the team leader poses a question to the group, the jumpy camera pans leftward to register Kei's reply.



After Kei grunts out an answer, the camera again pans left to pick out the youth next in line to answer, but the team leader (now offscreen) directs another question to Kei; the trigger-happy camera, apparently caught off-guard, doubles back to find Kei once more.



Hui's premeditated camera movement has feigned ignorance. Whereas certain images in *The Way We Are* betray prescience – as when shots empty of human presence anticipate the arrival of an offscreen figure – here the visual narration contrives an opposite effect, conferring upon the action a rhetoric of ad hoc spontaneity. Needless to say, shots such as this differ sharply from *The Way We Are*'s static arrays and controlled mise-en-scène, but both stylistic schemas – the roaming 'unrehearsed' shot and the distanced shot riveted in place – appeal to documentary verism, evoking the voyeurism and detachment of the observational camera. The fellowship sequence testifies to *The Way We Are*'s intrinsic stylistic pluralism,

but we should notice that, at a localized level, Hui matches style to action: the camera's jittery energy is apt to convey an animated debate among adolescents.

In its visual conceit, the fellowship scene evinces what might be called studied spontaneity. Here the profilmic event seems insensitive to the camera's point of vantage. If the camera happens not to occupy the optimal vantage point on the action, too bad for the camera (and for us): the action will march on regardless, and the camera must catch what it can. At times, it is the profilmic event itself – more than the camera – that radiates spontaneity. In *The Way We Are*, Hui makes figure staging a key ingredient of this contrivance.

Consider Kwai and Granny's first encounter at the supermarket. A medium-long shot yields a dorsal view of Kwai loading durians onto a grocery shelf.



The camera reframes slightly to admit Granny into view.



Kwai, alternately staged in profile and turned away from camera as she pivots in place, now occupies frame center in a fairly remote foreground. Granny holds a position to the right of Kwai. Flung into a background zone, a dorsally positioned man arranges fruit on a grocery display; as an oblique distant element periodically obscured by Kwai's foreground movement, he does not compel our attention. Granny asks Kwai for a job. Kwai, in response, beckons the background figure, now revealed to be the store manager.



The manager and Granny converse in the midground. Kwai resumes her task in the shot's foremost plane, intermittently obstructing the manager from our sightline; the inanimate camera, meanwhile, forsakes a more perspicuous vantage point on the action. (As in the earlier restaurant scene, Hui initiates a game of blocking and revealing engendered by figures moving within a fixed frame.)





The total effect is one of unadulterated realism: Hui's staging simulates the imperfect and arbitrary way that people array themselves in the real world. While the camera's sustained gaze evokes an observational aesthetic, the messiness of the staging points to a tactic of studied spontaneity. The scene's action has most assuredly been staged, but the choreography seeks to efface itself, to appear precisely unchoreographed, unartful, and 'real.'

An alternative strategy I will call actuality staging. At several junctures in *The Way We Are*, Hui drops rehearsed actors into crowded public places. Oblivious to the presence of the camera, the unforewarned, real-world passers-by trace mazy, unpredictable paths not choreographed by the director. In this staging schema, the suggestion of unstaged reality is not simulated but actual. When Kwai and Granny amble through a real Tin Shui Wai shopping mall, Hui launches their trajectory in deep space; indeed, at first we cannot pick them out of the *mêlée*, so cluttered are the long shot's planes of action.



Soon we spot the far-flung protagonists advancing toward the camera. To a large extent, Hui's staging of the actors is surrendered to chance. Though she has preordained the players' advance, she cedes control of the overall *mise-en-scène* to the imperfect disarray of reality. Now blocking and revealing springs not from an intricately crafted patterning of bodies, but from the chaotic flow of actual everyday street life. When a meandering pensioner hogs the center foreground, or when nondescript pedestrians drift across the shot's foremost plane, the viewer must settle for mere glimpses of the protagonists.





In fresh ways, Hui recruits the blocking-and-revealing schema to effect a game of perception with the viewer, enacting a play with visibility, and maintaining visual interest and variety. Above all, staging here works in concert with other features of actual location shooting – the technical roughness of the handheld camera, the televisual quality of high-definition digital video (DV), the reliance on available light – to suggest a documentary immediacy that, in turn, augments Hui’s rhetoric of the everyday.

Across her oeuvre, Hui embraces actuality staging as a marker of authenticity and realism. In a revealing passage of the documentary *Keep Rolling* (2020), Hui candidly bemoans her assistant director’s (AD) attempts to choreograph a crowd scene: ‘I often quarrel with my assistant directors,’ she says. ‘Sometimes I don’t care about the background. Just shoot! But [the ADs] would put many extras there, coaching them. I wanted to kill them!’ On the set of *Our Time Will Come* (2017), Hui hollers at an AD for orchestrating the extras’ movements: ‘They can walk wherever they like! Come on! Let’s shoot! Those guys [extras] over there are doing fine. Why make them walk like robots? Can’t we be flexible when we shoot?’ Besides an aesthetic concern for natural and realistic behavior, Hui’s remarks embody two imperatives of many a Hong Kong filmmaker: off-the-cuff adaptability and expediency.



*The Way We Are's* actuality staging finds a rich heritage in Hong Kong cinema. Embedding rehearsed actors within a haphazard reality had long been a favorite shooting strategy among the region's independent directors, not least due to economic necessity: Vincent Chui, Fruit Chan, and others substitute actual locations and real-world denizens for specially constructed sets and costly background players.



Hui's own work is, in this context, a notable precursor, from the early television dramas and New Wave experiments to mid-career docudramas (such as *Ordinary Heroes*) and social-realist melodramas (such as *Summer Snow*).



But the actuality schema stretches far beyond the margins of Hong Kong cinema. Indeed, in the 1980s and 1990s it became a popular resource of mainstream storytelling, as filmmakers embraced extensive location shooting. Not that location work was a straightforward expedient. Hong Kong's overcrowded streets could frustrate the filmmaker's efforts to isolate a suitable playing area in which to shoot. In addition, the colonial government proved stingy when it came to issuing location permits. Consequently, filmmakers resorted to hidden cameras and 'stolen' shots, snatching views of professional performers as they weaved through bustling urban terrain.

Studio-based filming dominated in earlier decades. In the 1950s, Cantonese melodramas (*wenyi pian*) favored the sound stage, while much of Shaw Brothers' 1960s output took advantage of Movietown's numerous outdoor stages. But by the early 1970s the popular rise of new genres (contemporary youthpics, social-problem dramas) motivated a shift to location shooting in urban locales.



Now staged action would be set against the vicissitudes of actual reality, a shooting method that often left an indexical trace on the films themselves (incidental passers-by gawking at the camera lens; conspicuous assemblies of rubberneckerers compelled by the film crew in their midst).



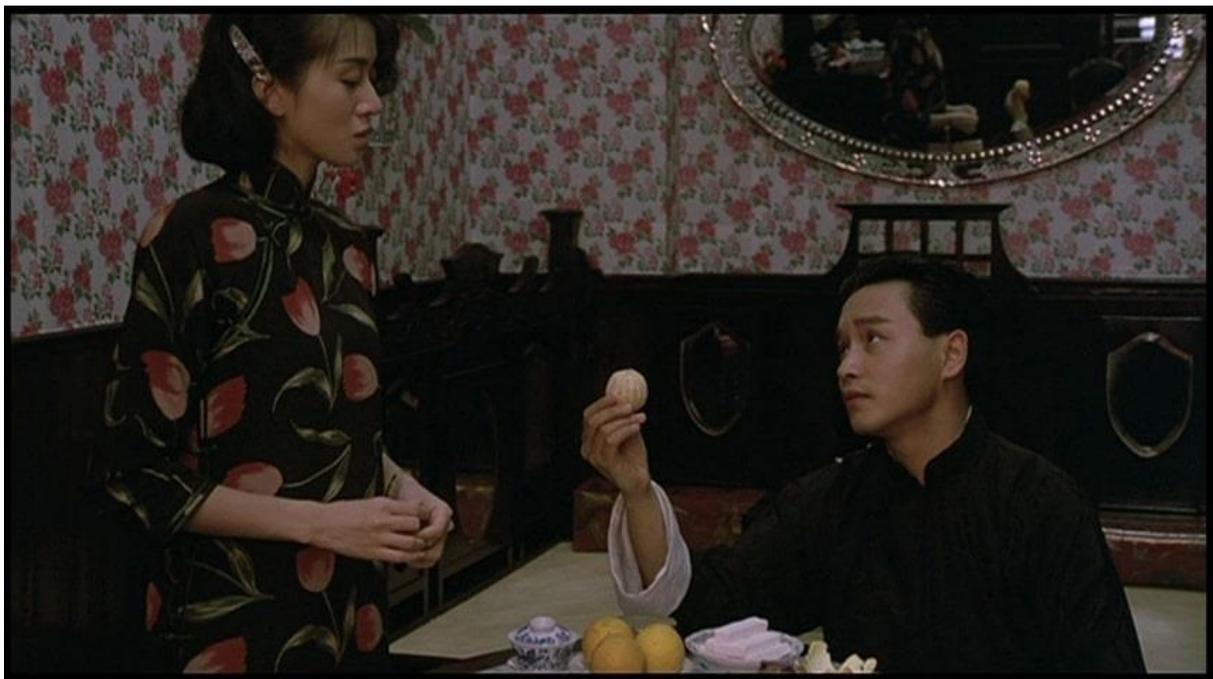
*The Way We Are* continues this long-established tradition of location staging and shooting. (*A Simple Life* will push the tactic even further in its nursing home scenes, embedding professional actors among real-life patients.) Hui embraces actuality staging both for its

capacity to capture the texture of everyday urban life, and for its ability to confer a kind of ethnographic credibility upon the fiction. At a time when critics decried the demise of Hong Kong cinema's aesthetic traditions (and more vaguely its 'identity'), *The Way We Are* proved that local filmmakers had not turned their back on the industry's stylistic schemas.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, they continued to mine these schemas in adroit and artistic ways.

### **'Maximalizing' motifs**

We can look to *The Way We Are* for evidence of other norms prevalent within pre-handover storytelling. Most pertinent to our discussion is Hong Kong cinema's renowned pictorial vividness: in ways both extroverted (John Woo, Wong Kar-wai) and refined (Stanley Kwan, Patrick Tam), the region's filmmakers have shown a long-standing commitment to pure cinema.





*The Way We Are*, I have suggested, maintains this impulse. At the level of plot, moreover, Hui's film adheres to a local principle of episodic (and typically reel-by-reel) construction. As David Bordwell has shown, Hong Kong films unify episodic plots by tactics of motivic braiding and parallelism (2011: 119), and here again *The Way We Are* hews to tradition. The film generates dramatic motifs out of ordinary domestic objects: newspapers, packets of tissue, plastic bags, thermoses, food items (durians, mushrooms, eggs, soup).



Sprinkled across the reels of action, the film's interwoven motifs not only bind the plot's episodes, but gradually accumulate narrative and thematic meaning all their own. As Hui has stated:

The minimalism of the [film's] choice of daily life elements, like the eating, the tissue paper, and the durian – all these [items] are like motifs in poetry which are repeated to show the relationship between people. [*The Way We Are*] is just centered on these

elements, rather than having different incidents showing the development of the relationships. (Anon 2009)

Motivic associations, then, can lay bare shifts in character relationships and psychology. Motifs as well can acquire visual eloquence, especially when other storytelling parameters are suppressed in minimalist fashion. And motifs can fulfil formal functions. Lacking a dramatically charged finale, *The Way We Are*'s final reel gathers together many motivic threads from earlier episodes, the marshalling of which provides a satisfying sense of closure.

One concise sequence shot brings together staging, reiterated motifs, and pictorial storytelling. At the film's midpoint, On returns home to find the telephone ringing. The caller is On's aunt, who reports that Kwai's mother has been taken ill and hospitalized. A Hollywood melodrama might treat this revelation as an occasion for full-blown hysteria – frantic cuts, emotive close-ups, plangent music – but Hui deflects emotionality onto pictorial restraint and motivic development. A static long shot reveals a niche of the apartment we have come to know well. At the left of frame is the ubiquitous dining table; to the right, the couch so familiar from the film's prologue. The rest of the setting is festooned with wall decorations, furniture, and bric-a-brac. No human figure populates the shot.



Hui has buried the telephone on the fringes of a densely packed composition, and so only the burr of the ringtone calls the object to our notice: consequently, our attention is steered to the lower right edge of the frame. Now On enters the prescient framing from the left foreground.



Scampering across the frame, he drops a plastic bag onto the dining table, perches on the couch, and picks up the receiver.



Throughout the duration of the scene, the camera maintains its stationary, distant point of vantage.

By this stage of the film, Hui has introduced and interlaced a mesh of motifs. As noted earlier, the prologue concludes with Kwai asking her son if he has bought the daily newspaper. Later, On dutifully returns with a copy of the *Oriental Daily*, only for Kwai to gently chide him for purchasing the item from a kiosk rather than a convenience store – the latter, she explains, issues a complimentary plastic bag and packet of tissues. (Gratis items are valued in this single-parent, low-income family.) Our sequence shot marks the next phase of this motivic progression. The buzzing telephone has ‘activated’ the right frame edge; when On scuttles into view, he activates the left vector of the image by planting a plastic bag on the dining table. A spatial tension now ensues: our eyes naturally gravitate toward On as he speaks into the phone, but Hui ensures that the plastic bag competes for attention too. A gentle breeze causes the bag to flutter, permitting us to see a newspaper tucked inside. (The stasis of the shot helps the quivering bag to stand out in relief.)



Now On hangs up the phone, and crosses leftward. His attention caught by the billowing bag, he pauses, as if remembering something.



He retrieves a small packet of tissues from his trouser pocket, deposits it on the table, and exits at the left foreground. As the scene concludes, the camera briefly lingers on the vacated scenic space.



Almost purely visually, the scene exceeds its explicit narrative function (relating news of a stricken relative) to fulfil a bundle of other tasks. Most basically, it activates zones of visual interest; indeed, the shot demonstrates Hui's deftness at steering attention and creating subtle gradations within a static and densely textured array. More elaborately, the scene

exemplifies *The Way We Are*'s gradual repetition, accumulation, and clustering of visual motifs. These motifs unify plot episodes in the traditional Hong Kong manner, but they also connote character development: evidently, On has heeded Kwai's advice to obtain a newspaper from the convenience store. The scene squeezes wry humor from On's obedience, while reinforcing the notion that, by acquiring know-how from Kwai, he gradually inherits her rituals and values. Characteristically, this humor and character delineation comes to us obliquely and unassertively. That On has patronized a convenience store is a development we must infer, since the elliptical narration has skipped over any such event. And true to the film's minimalist framework, Hui employs no analytical cuts to privilege the items arrayed on the table. Rather, the spectator must determine the objects' significance without the aid of narrative redundancy or pictorial emphasis. Lastly, Hui composes the sequence symmetrically: the shot opens and closes by dwelling on unpopulated space, while On's traversal of the setting is choreographed in boomerang fashion, the boy departing the frame from whence he entered.

In no sense are such scenes 'absolutely devoid of mise-en-scène' (Szeto 2011: 63). To the contrary, this single shot (lasting thirty-one seconds) constructs a mise-en-scène that preserves Hong Kong cinema's principle of motivic construction, charts character development, implies thematic meaning, fills in ellipses, generates humor, exhibits formal symmetry, and imbues everyday objects with poetic resonance – and it does all this independently of dialogue. Its deceptively simple staging harbors a host of meanings and effects, while the scene at large exemplifies a hallmark of Hong Kong storytelling: the satisfying payoff yielded by carefully planted and patterned motifs. Here, as so often in *The Way We Are*, Hui offers us pictorial storytelling at its most quietly virtuosic.

### **Conclusion: Traditions and traits**

I have sought in this account to redress a critical lacuna by highlighting Hui's proficiency in pictorial storytelling. Concentrating particularly on strategies of staging in *The Way We Are*, I have tried to demonstrate how Hui subtly but potently dramatizes the action through imagery. Avoiding heavy-handedness, she harnesses staging tactics to a clutch of functions: aligning and counterposing characters, launching and modifying the primacy effect, conveying the repetitive grind of menial labor, contriving a documentary rhetoric of authenticity,

misdirecting our expectations, sculpting attention, conjuring a perceptual play with visibility, and fostering comic amusement. We have seen how Hui deploys spatial alignment, echoic staging, blocking and revealing, studied spontaneity, actuality staging, and other visual schemas to manifest an overarching theme of cross-generational harmony, familial and communal unity, and the preservation of cultural traditions. *The Way We Are* itself, I have argued, operates in this latter vein too: it keeps alive long-standing canons of Hong Kong storytelling, at the levels of filmmaking practice (reel-by-reel plotting; location shooting), genre (by evoking a local social-realist tradition; by reworking the norms of Cantonese melodrama<sup>16</sup>), narrative (episodic structure; parallelisms; motivic patterning), and visual style (pictorial storytelling). In the post-1997 years, critics have bemoaned the root-and-branch mainlandization of Hong Kong cinema, but they overlook the efforts of Hui – along with many of her compatriots – to defiantly cling to long-established, local principles of story and style. Even in the post-handover era, as Sheldon Lu writes, ‘Hong Kong stubbornly persists as a local cinema’ (2015: 118).

There are many dimensions of Hui’s film style still to be illuminated. By focusing principally on cinematic staging, I have necessarily neglected other fundamentals of visual style. My account of *The Way We Are* has not tried to do justice to the film’s lighting scheme, colour design, or DV aesthetic. Nor do I claim to have identified authorial traits that are detectable in every Ann Hui film. Indeed, anyone exploring Hui’s visual characteristics must reckon with the sheer eclecticism of her oeuvre. As James Udden maintains, it is ‘difficult to pinpoint a “signature style”” governing Hui’s corpus of films (2020: 185). Hui is both a polystylist and a genre pluralist, hopscotching from horror-comedy to historical epic, and prone to ‘genre-mixing within films’ (Stokes 2012: 59). Based on its schemas of staging and scenography, *The Way We Are* might tempt us to assimilate Hui to a filmic tradition that David Bordwell terms ‘Asian minimalism’ (2005: 231-232), or even to the global canon of slow cinema. Certainly it is possible to link Hui to the latter mode: she appears as herself in the early scenes of *The River* (1997), directed by Taiwanese auteur Tsai Ming-liang, a celebrated purveyor of the long take / long shot / depth staging aesthetic.



But Hong Kong cinema – even its art cinema wing – has no full-fledged tradition of slow cinema, and to assimilate Hui’s filmmaking to the category of slow cinema or Asian minimalism would be to ignore the many counterexamples within Hui’s filmography. (To cite just one case: *The Way We Are*’s companion piece *Night and Fog* [2009] flaunts fast cutting, startling CUs, slow motion, and spatial disjunctures, none of which appears in its more temperate predecessor.)



Any account of Hui's film style must acknowledge the taxonomical slipperiness of this eclectic filmmaker's body of work. Her career encompasses fiction and nonfiction as well as mainstream and 'art' modes of filmmaking. Given such versatility, we should not expect to find the same techniques repeated in every film. For critics such as Jonathan Rosenbaum, the lack of a stable auteurist signature relegates Hui to the rank of *metteur-en-scène* (Rosenbaum 1998; Erens 2000: 180). But I would argue that Hui's oeuvre is governed not so much by a specific set of *techniques* (such as voiceover, low-key lighting, POV, and other imputed signature traits) as by an abiding aesthetic *principle* – specifically, a

commitment to story-driven style. In short, Hui is pledged to narrative and stylistic coherence. ‘I think my style changes for different movies,’ she has said, ‘depending on the subject matter and the crew that I am working with’ (Berry 2005: 436).<sup>17</sup> In close consultation with her creative collaborators (especially the director of photography), Hui adopts a bespoke approach to film style, ideally tailored to the subject material at hand. The privileging of narratively unified stylistic devices constitutes an authorial principle – indeed, a signature – that glues Hui’s heterogenous films together. Still, Hui scholarship has much yet to discover and explore. If we are to take the full measure of this remarkable filmmaker, we need to give due attention to not only her sociocultural themes, but also to her enduring commitment to the pictorial art of cinema.

#### Abstract:

The cinema of Ann Hui has been studied from various angles. Sociological scholars have examined Hui’s robust social realism, her sympathetic representation of the Hong Kong proletariat, her fixation on the grind of poverty, her attention to the travails of the oppressed. Cultural historians have treated Hui’s penchant for flashback plotting as an occasion to ruminate on cultural memory and amnesia. Feminist theorists have illuminated a perennial Hui theme: the plight of marginalized women both in patriarchal Hong Kong and within the Chinese diaspora. Critics of all stripes have fastened onto Hui’s trademark ‘humanism.’ Yet studies of Hui’s visual style remain scarce indeed. This is a significant lacuna, not least because the sociological themes that have so attracted scholars to Hui’s films are often manifested wholly or chiefly by visual means.

Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in *The Way We Are* (2008), a film whose minimalist downgrading of dialogue and dramatic incident thrusts the burden of narrative and thematic meaning onto the image track. In this article, I analyze *The Way We Are*’s visual stratagems, focusing particularly on tactics of figure staging. My purpose is to trace Hui’s visual articulation not only of sociological themes, but also of a host of other narrative meanings; and to canvass the ways Hui’s visual tactics engender an array of narrational and expressive effects. Exhibiting a restrained yet eloquent visual narration, *The Way We Are* is as much a triumph of pictorial storytelling as it is a landmark in Hong Kong social criticism. Hovering over this article is a broader thesis pertaining to the imputed ‘mainlandization’ of post-handover cinema. Despite critical pronouncements of a fin-de-siècle and the demise or disappearance of Hong Kong film style, *The Way We Are*, I contend, preserves traditional Hong Kong principles of narrative and stylistic expression. Thanks to Hui and many of her compatriots, the Hong Kong film industry endures as a resilient and creatively fecund local cinema.

**Keywords:** Ann Hui; *The Way We Are*; Hong Kong cinema; visual style; cinematic staging; minimalism; auteurism

**Bio:** Gary Bettinson is Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at Lancaster University. He is the author of *The Sensuous Cinema of Wong Kar-wai* (Hong Kong University Press), co-editor (with James Udden) of *The Poetics of Chinese Cinema* (Palgrave Macmillan) and (with Daniel Martin) *Hong Kong Horror Cinema* (Edinburgh University Press), and co-editor (with Tan See Kam) of the journal, *Asian Cinema* (Intellect Press).

## References

Anon. 2009. 'The Way We Are – Ann Hui at the Far East Film Festival – Udine 2009.'

*YouTube:* [www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEIWGxy0FTc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEIWGxy0FTc) (Accessed 7 September 2021)

Berry, Michael. 2005. *Speaking in Images: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Bettinson, Gary. 2020. 'Yesterday Once More: Hong Kong-China Coproductions and the Myth of Mainlandization,' *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 14:1, 16-31.

Bordwell, David. 2011. *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*. (Second edition.) Madison, Wisconsin: Irvington Way Institute Press.

Bordwell, David. 2005. *Figures Traced in Light: On Cinematic Staging*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Chang, Jing Jing. 2016. 'Ann Hui's Tin Shui Wai Diptych: The Flashback and Feminist Perception in Post-Handover Hong Kong,' *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 33:8, 722-742.

Cheung, Esther M.K.; Gina Marchetti; Tan See Kam. 2011. 'Interview with Ann Hui: On the Edge of the Mainstream,' in Esther M.K. Cheung, Gina Marchetti, and Tan See Kam (eds) *Hong Kong Screenscapes: From the New Wave to the Digital Frontier*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 67-74.

Chu, Karen. 2012. 'A Not So Simple Life,' *The Hollywood Reporter* (Filmart edition, March 19), 10-11.

- Erens, Patricia Brett. 2000. 'The Film Work of Ann Hui,' in Poshek Fu and David Desser (eds) *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 176-195.
- Heskins, Andrew. 2014. 'Ann Hui Interviewed: "No Matter How We Wanted to Be, We Couldn't Be Very Serious!"' *easternkicks.com*. <https://www.easternkicks.com/features/ann-hui-interviewed> (Accessed 6 April 2021)
- Ho, Elaine Yee-lin. 2001. 'Women on the Edges of Hong Kong Modernity: The Films of Ann Hui,' in Esther C.M. Yau (ed.) *At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World*, Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 177-206.
- Hong, Zheng. 2019. 'Translocal Female Subjectivity: Notes on Ann Hui's *The Golden Era*,' *Asian Cinema* 30:1, 91-107.
- Lee, Maggie. 2008. 'The Way We Are' (review), *The Hollywood Reporter* (4 February), <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-reviews/way-we-are-125594/> (Accessed 2 March 2021)
- Li, Han. 2015. 'Alternative Locality: Geopolitics and Cultural Identity in Ann Hui's *A Simple Life*,' *Asian Cinema* 26:1, 23-41.
- Lo, Zabrina. 2020. 'Hong Kong Director Ann Hui Talks Winning The Golden Lion Award and Her Filmmaking Journey,' *Hong Kong Tatler* (5 November) <https://www.tatlerasia.com/culture/entertainment/hk-ann-hui-hong-kong-interview> (Accessed 2 March 2021)
- Lu, Sheldon. 2015. 'Commentary: Dimensions of Hong Kong Cinema,' in Esther M.K. Cheung, Gina Marchetti, and Esther C.M. Yau (eds) *A Companion to Hong Kong Cinema*, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 116-120.
- Phathanavirangoon, Raymond. 2009. 'Ann Hui: At the World's End and Back,' *The 33<sup>rd</sup> Hong Kong International Film Festival*. [www.hkiff.org.hk/eng/news/detail/96.html](http://www.hkiff.org.hk/eng/news/detail/96.html) (Accessed 20 April 2009)
- Rosenbaum, Jonathan. 1998. 'Eighteen Springs: In Defense of Non-Masterpieces,' *Chicago Reader* (16 April) <https://chicagoreader.com/film/in-defense-of-non-masterpieces/> (Accessed 13 September 2021)

Stokes, Lisa Odham. 2012. 'Ann Hui,' in Gary Bettinson (ed.) *Directory of World Cinema: China*, Bristol & Chicago: Intellect Press, 58-61.

Szeto, Mirana M. 2011. 'Ann Hui at the Margin of Mainstream Hong Kong Cinema,' in Esther M.K. Cheung, Gina Marchetti, and Tan See Kam (eds) *Hong Kong Screenscapes: From the New Wave to the Digital Frontier*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 51-66.

Udden, James. 2020. 'Transnational Chinese-language Auteurism: Time, Place, Gender,' in Song Hwee Lim and Julian Ward (eds) *The Chinese Cinema Book* (second edition), London & New York: BFI, 179-188.

Veg, Sebastian. 2014. 'Anatomy of the Ordinary: New Perspectives in Hong Kong Independent Cinema,' *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 8:1, 73-92.

Yau, Ching. 2004. *Filming Margins: Tang Shu Shuen, A Forgotten Hong Kong Woman Director*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

### **Filmography:**

*Father and Son* (Allen Fong, 1981)

*The Generation Gap* (Zhang Che, 1973)

*Imitation of Life* (Douglas Sirk, 1959)

*Keep Rolling* (Man Lim-chung, 2020)

*Made in Hong Kong* (Fruit Chan, 1997)

*My American Grandson* (Ann Hui, 1991)

*Night and Fog* (Ann Hui, 2009)

*Ordinary Heroes* (Ann Hui, 1999)

*Our Time Will Come* (Ann Hui, 2017)

*Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955)

*A Simple Life* (Ann Hui, 2011)

*Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937)

*The Teddy Girls* (Lung Kong, 1969)

*The Way We Are* (Ann Hui, 2008)

*Young and Dangerous* (Andrew Lau, 1996)

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Patricia Brett Erens (2000: 192), for instance, refers to Hui's visual style as 'memorable,' while Han Li (2015: 34), writing of *A Simple Life* (2011), characterizes the director's 'cinematic language' as 'unique.' *The Way We Are*'s visual style is ambiguously described by Zabrina Lo as 'non-cinematic' (2020).

<sup>2</sup> These descriptions are derived from Szeto (2011: 53; 66); Lee (2008); and Roger Garcia quoted in Chu (2012: 11).

<sup>3</sup> See Cheung et al (2011: 69); and Berry (2005: 436).

<sup>4</sup> If I cannot examine all of Hui's visual techniques here, still less can I give due attention to her sonic strategies, but sound and music are essential components in Hui's stylistic discourse. In *The Way We Are*, a melodic piano motif confers a tranquil ambience upon the mise-en-scène, functions as a delicate musical bridge from one scene to the next, and occasionally underscores a moment of pathos. Mostly, though, Hui employs the nondiegetic score sparsely, and generally refuses to italicize poignant action with musical accompaniment. Most broadly, the piano motif's minor key simplicity, along with its relaxed tempo and sparing usage, accords with the film's overall plainness of presentation, its general stripping down of story and style.

<sup>5</sup> Apart from staging, the film's mise-en-scène discreetly sharpens character exposition. For instance, a wall in the apartment of Kwai's co-worker, Granny, is speckled with antiquated snapshots of (whom we infer to be) her family relatives. Many of the portraits are black-and-white stills; the portraits that are in color have faded. Purely visually, the décor hints at a woman whose recent past is bereft of meaningful relationships or occasions to be memorialized, and whose present-day existence is dominated by memories of absent loved ones.

<sup>6</sup> Not least certain films by Hui herself. Her mainstream genre films, in particular, adopt a crisp cutting rate characteristic of popular Hong Kong cinema.

---

<sup>7</sup> This moment marks the film's only instance of Hui's authorial mirror motif; as noted above, Hui's stylistic tendencies find diminished expression in *The Way We Are*. Furthermore, mirrors typically activate offscreen space and thus graphically 'open up' dramatic space, expanding a locale's spatial dimensions. In *The Way We Are*, however, Hui seeks to 'close down' the main apartment interior, the better to convey the relatively cramped and claustrophobic quality of the protagonists' living quarters. We might also note of this bathroom mirror shot that it presents On's reflection in such a way that his gaze is directed straight at the camera lens. The character's diegeticized look at the camera foreshadows a more conspicuous use of this device later in the film.

<sup>8</sup> Across the film, this item of décor will serve as a spatial anchor for Hui's gradual revelation of the apartment milieu.

<sup>9</sup> Think of the disaffected teenage inhabitants of Tin Shui Wai in Lawrence Ah-mon's *Besieged City* (2008), the troubled teens populating the public housing blocks in Fruit Chan's *Made in Hong Kong* (1997), and the triad cadres of Andrew Lau's *Young and Dangerous* franchise (1996-2000).

<sup>10</sup> Here is a facet of the film downplayed in most accounts: for as much as *The Way We Are* is a 'woman's picture' and a feminist narrative, it displays as much interest in On as in Kwai and Granny. The narration frequently swerves from the female protagonists to attach us to On's spatio-temporal path; the film tethers POV to neither Kwai nor Granny, but rather to On's perceptual experience; and while Kwai changes hardly at all across the plot's duration, Hui assigns On an implicit arc of character progression. It is therefore reductive to categorize *The Way We Are* as a purely woman-centric film. I do not wish to overstate this point – *The Way We Are* is not *more* interested in On than in its women protagonists – but I do point out that Hui's reputation as a feminist filmmaker has tended to blind critics to her facility with male characterization.

<sup>11</sup> On's earlier look into the lens during the bathroom interlude has primed the fellowship scene's flagrant address to camera. In the latter instance, the precise diegetic status of such shots is somewhat ambiguous: on the one hand, the CU singles of Kei and of On can be fairly straightforwardly grasped as POVs from the optical vantage point of the girl that addresses them; on the other hand, such shots recall 'vox pop' testimonies, and accord with the documentary stylistics adopted elsewhere in *The Way We Are* (more on this presently).

<sup>12</sup> The shot's foreground-background composition recalls the restaurant scene, in which On – as here, seated against a wall – comprises a centered background element. The earlier restaurant scene sets the young generation (On and his cousins) at a physical distance from

---

their elders, while here in the funeral scene, Hui's composition spatially parses out the different generations within a single shot: Kwai and a middle-aged woman occupy the foreground, while On and his teenage cousin are stationed farther away.

<sup>13</sup> Of course, while such films thrust familial dysfunction into the narrative foreground, they often resolve dramatic conflict in such a way as to conservatively reaffirm the normative family unit.

<sup>14</sup> We can find, too, a precedent for Hui's extolling of community in *My American Grandson* (1991). A twelve-year-old Chinese American visits his grandfather in Shanghai. The obnoxious youth is portrayed as a bundle of cultural clichés: perpetually chomping on gum and swigging Coca-Cola, outfitted in baseball jersey, sneakers, and cap, arrogant and self-entitled, prone to profanity, and insensitive to local Chinese language and customs, he personifies American vulgarity. Gradually, he comes to Americanize his grandfather's village; in turn, he begins to acclimatize to Chinese culture. The film's story owes a debt to *On Golden Pond* (1981), but the generational conflict at the heart of that film is here complemented and exacerbated by a violent clash of cultures. By the climax, when the boy must inevitably return to the US, his cultural assimilation is complete, while the aging local community comes to embrace him as one of their own.

<sup>15</sup> See Bettinson (2020) for a detailed survey of (and counterarguments to) this widespread critical perspective.

<sup>16</sup> *The Way We Are* arouses and reworks specific generic schemata popularized in 1950s Cantonese melodrama (*wenyi pian*). The narrative trope whereby the heroine's offspring are unveiled as scheming ingrates, or in which the martyred protagonist suffers deeply from the abuses of tyrannical relatives, are tapped but radically subverted in Hui's film. *The Way We Are* finds antecedents, too, in Hong Kong's social realist tradition. Jing Jing Chang (2016) traces Hui's lineage back to the Cantonese 'social ethics' film of the postwar period.

<sup>17</sup> See Ching Yau (2004: 23) and Zheng Hong (2019: 93) for further testimony from Hui on this point. Elsewhere, Hui has identified the director of photography as a prime collaborator. Speaking generally, she states: 'For me, the contribution of a cinematographer is very big, because I'm not technical. I wouldn't tell him what lens to use; I just convey my feelings over using a long shot, or a close-up. What lens he uses and so on, I leave to him. So he's very much a creative partner' (Heskins 2014). The cinematographer of *The Way We Are* is Charlie Lam.

