

The Interaction of Narrative and Visual Style with Time, History, Memory, and Ethnic Identity in *A City of Sadness* (1989)

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Abstract:

A City of Sadness explores the intersections of time, history, memory, and ethnic identity through its distinctive narrative and visual techniques. As a cornerstone of Taiwan region's New Wave cinema, the film utilizes a non-linear narrative structure and subtle visual cues to critique official historical accounts, particularly those surrounding the February 28th Incident and its aftermath. Through fragmented time sequences and emotionally resonant depictions of personal and familial experiences, the film challenges conventional historiography, emphasizing individual memory as a counterpoint to institutional narratives. Drawing on the theories of Hayden White, Benedict Anderson, and Fredric Jameson, this study situates Hou Hsiao-hsien's cinematic techniques within a broader framework of historical interpretation and identity formation. The paper highlights the film's dual role as both a cultural medium for historical reflection and a commentary on the contested nature of Taiwan residents' ethnic identity, shaped by colonial legacies and political transformations.

Keywords:

Taiwan region's New Wave Cinema
Hou Hsiao-hsien
Historical narrative
Visual style
A City of Sadness

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1. Introduction

Hou Hsiao-hsien, a founding figure of the Taiwan region's New Wave Cinema movement, is renowned for his unique filmmaking style and his pioneering approach to historical exploration. His acclaimed film, *A City of Sadness*, not only received widespread international praise but also played a pivotal role in advancing the

study of Taiwan region's history and culture. Set during the 1940s and 1950s, a period marked by social upheaval and transformation in Taiwan region, the film presents a deep engagement with history, challenging the boundaries of traditional historical narratives. Hou's work also initiated the shift of Taiwan region's film industry towards modernity within the context of Taiwan region's New

Wave Cinema ^[1].

In *A City of Sadness*, Hou Hsiao-hsien tells the story of a family during Taiwan region's White Terror, while also reflecting the complexity and diversity of history through his distinctive narrative and visual styles. This paper will explore film language as a mode of representation, illustrating how history is both depicted and critiqued in the film. Furthermore, it will examine the pictorial and narrative techniques that enable viewers to engage with history both intellectually and emotionally. By analyzing these elements, the paper aims to provide a deeper understanding of how films shape our recollections of historical events and influence our sense of ethnic identity.

2. Historical narrative and the shaping of ethnic identity

In *A City of Sadness*, Hou Hsiao-hsien tells the complex history of Taiwan region's transition from Japanese colonial rule to Kuomintang governance through a non-linear narrative. Rather than merely arranging events chronologically, this approach presents the layered and multifaceted nature of history through the perspectives and memories of different characters ^[2]. Non-linear narratives can unveil the contested and intricate nature of history ^[3]. For instance, in *A City of Sadness*, the film does not directly depict the violent scenes of the February 28th Incident but instead conveys tension and fear through the characters' fragmented dialogue and everyday life. This narrative technique allows the audience to feel the profound impact of historical events on the lives of ordinary people. Non-linear storytelling emphasizes the tension between personal memory and official history. In the film, fragments of individual memories and family stories challenge and complement official historical narratives. This aligns with Benedict Anderson's argument in *Imagined Communities*, where he suggests that "nationalism is an imaginary representation of historical facts" ^[4]. Anderson's theory helps explain how Hou Hsiao-hsien challenges and reconstructs the way Taiwan residents perceive their own history through the cultural medium of film. Hou Hsiao-hsien's work not only recounts a historical event but also explores "how history is remembered and narrated." This resonates

with Hayden White's perspective in *Metahistory*, where he proposes that historical narratives are inherently interpretive, with historians using narrative strategies to "plot" the past and impart meaning and structure to history ^[5]. In *A City of Sadness*, Hou Hsiao-hsien uses the film medium to illustrate the complexity of history, reminding the audience that history is not a single, official story but rather a tapestry woven from the lives of countless individuals and their memories.

The film explores key turning points in Taiwan region's history, particularly the February 28th Incident and its aftermath, through the experiences of the Lin and Wu families. Their personal stories are intertwined with the broader historical context of Taiwan region's social turmoil, underscoring the deep connection between the individual and the fate of the nation. Hiromi, the narrator, links her life story to historical events through her diary. Her gentle language reflects her hope for a better future amid the chaos of history, symbolizing the spiritual resilience that sustains the people of Taiwan region. Wen-ching, a photographer, uses photography as a way to preserve history, with photographs serving as memories of time. This aligns with the film's theme of reconstructing memories of historical events. Instead of directly showing the suffering of the lower class, Hou Hsiao-hsien uses a Chinese song sung by the upper class at a party, repeating the word "drifting," subtly conveying the loneliness and helplessness of people displaced by war. At the same time, the song expresses the intellectuals' love and nostalgia for their homeland, as well as the Nationalist Party's political uncertainty. Through these gentle recollections of the past and the uncertainty about the future, Hou Hsiao-hsien encapsulates the Taiwan residents' sense of alienation and identity crisis amid significant historical change ^[6]. This alienation stems not only from the external oppression of political forces but also from internal struggles over what it means to be a "Taiwan resident."

The film's visual style, such as its use of hazy lighting and slow camera movements, enhances the ambiguity of history and memory. Rather than explicitly showing the brutal details of historical events, Hou Hsiao-hsien reflects the impact of history through the characters' daily lives and interactions. This narrative technique transforms the film from a mere historical record into a profound reflection on history, challenging

traditional narrative conventions. While *A City of Sadness* makes a significant attempt to portray Taiwan region's complex history and cultural identity, the film's narrative method has its limitations. For example, its treatment of key historical events, such as the February 28th Incident, may seem vague or difficult to grasp for viewers unfamiliar with Taiwan region's history. Although this narrative technique is artistic, it may somewhat limit the educational value of historical events and the clarity of information transmission. Anderson's theory underscores that, even if members of a nation never meet face to face, they can still mentally imagine a shared community^[4]. This collective imagination is formed through shared memories and values transmitted via stories, media, education, and other cultural forms. *A City of Sadness* illustrates Taiwan region's ethnic identity issues at different historical stages through the diverse experiences of its main characters, revealing divisions within Taiwan resident society and conflicts between different groups.

3. The interweaving of time, history, and memory

Hou Hsiao-hsien chooses to narrate the story through fragmented time sequences, which echoes Jameson's concept of time distortion in postmodern films. Jameson noted that postmodern films tend to express the multidimensionality of history by reorganizing time, allowing the audience to experience events from multiple perspectives^[7]. For example, the story in the film does not unfold chronologically but instead transports the audience into different historical periods through non-linear narratives, thereby offering a deeper exploration of how social identity is shaped and disintegrated by historical fractures. The film's flashbacks reflect the overlap of history and time, as Shizuko converses with Hiromi about the past involving her brother and Hiro, while a Japanese song transports the scene back in time. This visual transition technique not only highlights the connection between personal memory and collective history but also embodies the fluidity and rupture between memory and reality. Through this technique, Hou Hsiao-hsien allows the audience to sense the passage of time and the long-lasting impact of historical events on personal lives.

In *A City of Sadness*, space is not merely a backdrop

but serves as a carrier of social identity and historical memory. Hou Hsiao-hsien uses meticulously crafted scenes to reinforce the connection between specific spaces and the history of the Taiwan region. Jameson mentions that postmodern cinema often uses space as a site for "identity generation"^[7]. The city of Taipei in the film is both a physical location and a symbol of past historical conflicts. Hou Hsiao-hsien reveals changes in social identity through shifts in the city itself, with each part of the city bearing traces of the past. The audience can feel the heavy influence of history through the characters' movements within these spaces. Hou Hsiao-hsien's films do not just focus on the main characters but portray the broader society through multiple characters, including marginalized figures. This approach aligns with Jameson's description of postmodern society, where identity is complex and shaped by various forces. In the film, different characters represent diverse social classes and political stances, and their interactions illustrate the intricate identity issues within Taiwan resident society. This interaction occurs not only on a personal level but also as an inevitable result of historical and social structures.

One notable scene in the film depicts family members exchanging information through letters, which carry both familial concerns and political tensions. Through the lens of reading these letters, Hou Hsiao-hsien closely follows their contents, delicately capturing the metaphorical meaning of information transmission and reflecting the suppression of free speech and personal emotions in that era. In another scene, the family gathers during the Spring Festival. While it appears to be a joyful reunion, the underlying tension is palpable as each member harbors concerns. Hou Hsiao-hsien uses intermittent dialogue and frequent camera cuts to express the estrangement and inner conflict among family members, driven by differing political backgrounds.

The film employs long shots and slow-motion effects to lend more weight and intensity to moments of significant historical value. A concrete example of this is when the family listens to the radio—shot from a long distance, capturing their dynamic facial expressions, which reflect a range of perspectives on the forthcoming social changes. This type of shot not only immerses the audience in the melodrama but also encourages a

deeper connection with the characters' hidden impulses. Furthermore, slow motion is used to represent scenes of holiday celebrations and family gatherings, slowing down the action to intensify the audience's awareness of the broader historical context surrounding such moments. For instance, during a street celebration, slow motion amplifies the movements and expressions of individuals, symbolizing the importance of these historical moments and the role of individuals within them.

In *A City of Sadness*, Hou Hsiao-hsien skillfully explores the construction and reconstruction of historical memory, particularly the representation of Taiwan region's complex historical memory and its tendency to be forgotten, through the lens of film narrative. Hayden White's theory of historical narrative provides a robust analytical framework, especially his concept of *Emplotment*, which refers to how historians construct specific historical understandings through narrative choices. The film does not directly present historical facts but instead conveys the changes in Taiwan resident society from the 1940s to the 1950s through the perspective of a family. This narrative approach is not merely a recreation of history, but a re-creation of historical memory, allowing the audience to experience the weight of history through personal and familial experiences. The "plot" in the film is exemplified in the handling of the February 28th Incident. Though not directly depicted, it is indirectly presented through its impact on the family's fate. By showcasing the pain and loss experienced by family members due to political turmoil, the film reconstructs the memory of this period, illustrating that this event was not only a political shift but also a disruption of ordinary lives. Although Hou Hsiao-hsien was not a witness to this history, he uses objective camera language to recreate it. In the scene where nurses are learning in the hospital, Hou Hsiao-hsien adopts the perspective of an observer, focusing the camera on the nurses' backs as they study, allowing the audience to "witness" this historical event firsthand.

4. Cultural criticism and theoretical application in *A City of Sadness*

In the film, the elder brother Wen-heung negotiates with the Shanghainese for the release of his brother

Wen-leung, who is imprisoned for being a traitor. The issue of the "language barrier" is depicted through the interpreter, who translates from Taiwan region's local language to Cantonese and then to Shanghainese. This process serves as a metaphor for the invasion of Taiwan region's culture by foreign influences. The film's use of multiple languages deepens the theme of identity. When analyzing *A City of Sadness*, it is impossible to ignore how the Kuomintang employed education and cultural policies to cultivate a unified narrative of Chinese history. A key factor that binds people into a "nation" is a "shared rich heritage of memory," which, through repetition, reinforces historical continuity and a sense of community^[8]. However, Hou Hsiao-Hsien employs largely restrained and serene panoramic and medium shots, with few close-ups, attempting to observe from the sidelines as much as possible. His cinematic techniques and directorial approach make a conscious effort to present the characters from this historical period in varied contexts, across different locations, and from diverse viewpoints, reflecting the subtle differences in how history is perceived through individual experiences.

5. Audience acceptance and the impact of emotional narratives

In the audience feedback, many viewers mentioned how *A City of Sadness* altered their perception of the history of the Taiwan region. Some stated that the film exposed aspects of history not covered in textbooks, allowing them to perceive history as more complex and multifaceted. *A City of Sadness* provided a profound understanding of the February 28 Incident for the first time^[9]. This review highlights how the film complements or challenges the gaps or biases in official historical education. Through family narratives, Hou Hsiao-hsien humanizes historical events, evoking emotional resonance and enhancing the audience's connection to the history, especially for those affected by events marginalized in the education system. The film's narrative strategy transcends the simple recounting of historical facts, delving into broader social and political issues through personal and familial experiences. This approach enables the audience to engage with and feel history on a deeper level. Some viewers noted that although the film's pace is slow, every

shot is filled with emotion, prompting them to reflect on their own identity and past ^[10]. This viewer's experience underscores Hou Hsiao-hsien's use of slow-motion and long-shot techniques, which not only decelerate the narrative pace but also intensify the audience's emotional involvement. The slow-paced narrative allows for more time to digest and reflect on the historical content presented, thereby deepening the understanding of the connection between individuals and the national changes in Taiwan region's history. Moreover, this technical approach extends the historical discussion to encompass personal and ethnic identity formation, offering the audience a chance to reflect on their relationship with history. Some film critics have argued, "This film is a profound education about the history of Taiwan region, making me realize the diversity and complexity of historical memory" ^[11]. This review underscores the film's effectiveness in presenting historical diversity and complexity. Rather than simply narrating a historical event, Hou Hsiao-hsien portrays multiple interpretations and memories, challenging a singular historical narrative. This diverse storytelling allows the audience to recognize that history is not only a record of the past but also the foundation for current identity and future choices.

In this film, Hou Hsiao-hsien carefully crafts an emotional narrative, enabling the audience not only to grasp the facts of historical events but also to profoundly feel their emotional impact. Through nuanced character portrayals and emotional arcs, the film successfully fosters emotional resonance with the history of the Taiwan region, which in turn deepens the audience's connection with both ethnic identity and historical events. A key emotional narrative technique employed in the film is the exploration of the characters' inner worlds. Additionally, the film reflects the influence of history by depicting everyday family interactions. This seemingly casual, yet deeply meaningful narrative style brings historical events closer, linking them to the characters' daily lives. This storytelling strategy not only highlights the specific effects of historical events on personal lives but also allows the audience to forge a personal emotional connection with history by relating their own experiences to the situations depicted in the film. The film also cleverly utilizes its environment and setting to reflect the historical impact on an emotional level. For

example, Hou Hsiao-hsien illustrates the changing times through the evolution of Taipei's streets. The image of old shops being gradually replaced by new buildings not only mirrors shifts in the economic and social structure but also symbolizes the fading memories of the old era and the formation of new identities.

6. Conclusion

In summary, the key distinction between Hou Hsiao-hsien's film *A City of Sadness* and traditional historical narratives lies in its emphasis on individual and family experiences, rather than presenting the subject as merely a casualty of chaos. Historical events, shaped by wars, conflicts, and violence, often evoke anger, yet the film avoids portraying these events as abstract or distant occurrences. Instead, it succeeds at the highest level by illustrating how historical events affect the daily lives, decisions, and emotions of individuals. Hou Hsiao-hsien effectively intertwines macro and micro histories—both national and personal—through his characters, offering a grand historical account of social change through subtle cinematic techniques and delicate storytelling. This approach introduces a fresh perspective in the portrayal of historical themes, distinguishing the film from conventional linear storytelling. Furthermore, the film's unconventional treatment of time and space expands the cinematic language of Asian cinema, providing an immersive experience rather than a traditional narrative. Given different cultural and political contexts, one can consider how film, as a cultural medium, intervenes in historical narratives, influencing or deepening people's understanding and emotional responses to historical events. Future research could also examine how cinematic technologies, such as modern digital and virtual reality tools, shape the presentation and reception of historical narratives, fostering more immersive experiences. Finally, the fluidity and plurality of identities represent significant areas for further study. In an era marked by globalization and escalating regional conflicts, exploring how cinema portrays and influences cross-cultural and cross-ethnic identities—particularly those of displaced persons and marginalized groups—will be a meaningful avenue for research.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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