

movie magic: snow falling on old film posters high above a deserted Main Street. In between, *Mambo* in some ways revisits *Flowers of Shanghai*, Hou's brothel-set period piece—it's also a story of entrapment shrouded in an opiate fog. Though the camera is more restless than usual (there are fractionally more cuts too), the film's subject is inertia. Twentyish Vicky (the impossibly luminous Shu Qi), stuck with a possessive, good-for-nothing boyfriend, strikes up a friendship with an older, pensive mobster (Hou regular Jack Kao), and arrives at a new equilibrium by the end. But Hou charts her metamorphosis via chunks of purposefully stagnant real-time, punctuated by fleeting, deciduous epiphanies. The vortex-like structure of flashbacks within flashbacks is further complicated by hindsight: Vicky's rueful voice-over is situated 10 years in the future, and the narration often simply relates the action that will follow a few scenes hence, freighting the film with a vertiginous déjà vu. A mid-movie detour to a mountain town in Hokkaido occasions facial imprints in a snowbank. It's *Millennium Mambo*'s single most exquisite image—an indelible symbol of evanescence. ♦



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ABOUT THE FILM

A stylish and seductive submersion into the techno-scored neon nightlife of Taipei, Hou Hsiao-hsien's much-misunderstood marvel stars Shu Qi (*The Assassin*) as an aimless bar hostess drifting away from her blowhard boyfriend and towards Jack Kao's suave, sensitive gangster. Structured as a flashback to the then-present from the then-future of 2011, it's a transfixing trance-out of a movie, drenched in club lights, ecstatic endorphin-rush exhilaration, and a nagging undercurrent of ennui. *New 4K restoration*.

119 min. | Taiwan/France | 2001

Millennium Mambo by J. Hoberman

The following article was originally published by the New York Times, December 22, 2022

Sordid yet transcendent, bathed in neon haze and set to a relentless techno-beat, Hou Hsiao-hsien's "Millennium Mambo" — the tale of a teenage Taipei club girl — is not only the most pop movie the great Taiwanese filmmaker has ever made but, intermittently, among the most astonishingly beautiful.

The movie has a capital-L look, and the 4K restoration, opening at Metrograph in Manhattan on Dec. 23, does it justice.

"Millennium Mambo" premiered at the 2001 Cannes Film Festival, where it was given a mixed reception and an award for sound design. Hou's first feature since his exquisite period piece "Flowers of Shanghai," the movie marked his entry into contemporary territory occupied by two of his younger admirers, the filmmakers Olivier Assayas and Wong Kar-wai.

Hou's frequent cinematographer, Mark Lee Ping-bin, had just shot Wong's "In the Mood For Love," and he reprised its voluptuous imagery: Cigarettes are orange points of light in the blue-on-blue disco where Vicky (Shu Qi) spends her nights; the cramped, cruddy apartment she shares with her emotionally abusive boyfriend, a DJ wannabe (Tuan Chun-hao), is a perfumed miasma. The pad's lush mise-en-scène sets up a shock cut to a gyrating butt in the hostess bar where Vicky has taken a job and where she meets her sometime protector, a benign gangster with a Buddhist streak (Hou regular Jack Kao).

Some took "Millennium Mambo" as Hou's misguided attempt to connect with a younger generation, perhaps forgetting that he had begun his career as a commercial filmmaker and made more than a few "youth films" — notably the not dissimilar and initially underappreciated "Daughter of the Nile."

According to Maggie Cheung, Hou had originally wanted her to play Vicky, opposite Tony Leung, her co-star from "In the Mood for Love." Shu Qi is a less subtle actor than Cheung, but the movie is stronger for it. Stunningly photogenic, remote and self-destructive, alternately passive and hysterical, Shu Qi's character lives in a trance, reminiscent of the Warhol superstar Edie Sedgwick. As the *New York Times* critic Elvis Mitchell wrote in his mildly favorable review, "the insistence of high-throb electronica calls out to Vicky, so that she pounds the thoughts out of her head."

Vicky's neurotic behavior makes "Millennium Mambo" almost a case history or, given her repetitive voice-over narration, a kind of ballad. At the same time, like other Hou films, it is a temporal pretzel. Vicky narrates her story, apparently set in the year 2000, from a point 10 years in the future. Not infrequently we hear about events before we see them.

Most mysterious are the brief sequences set in the sleepy, snowy Japanese island of Hokkaido — an alpine environment far different from steamy Taipei. Are these unmotivated scenes a flash-forward to Vicky's untroubled future? A deliberately unconvincing happy ending à la Douglas Sirk? A fantasy triggered by her chance encounter, while clubbing, with two Japanese brothers?

That the director is something of a Japanophile — and that, in a spasm of narrative ambiguity, Vicky finds herself in the snowbound town that hosts the Yubari International Fantastic Film Festival — could support any of these theories.

Let It Snow by Dennis Lim

The following article was originally published by The Village Voice, June 25, 2002

BAMcinémathèque's series of orphan movies, drawn from the results of the *Voice's* year-end critics' poll, continues this weekend with the local premiere of *Millennium Mambo* (June 29), the latest (and first of a planned "youth" trilogy) by famously undistributable Taiwanese master Hou Hsiao-hsien. Even Hou's usual champions were lukewarm in this case—the film barely made a ripple at Cannes, and the director's longtime patron, the New York Film Festival, failed to issue the customary invite. But this shimmering excursion through Taipei nightlife—scored to a ghostly, faraway electro throb and coated in a neon glaze by cinematographer Mark Lee—is a slow burn of profound sadness salvaged by some of Hou's most breath-catchingly beautiful passages to date.

Case in point: The opening tracking shot, slightly slowed down and flooded with resigned Wong-ian narration, tails a young woman as she blithely strides along a covered, fluorescent-lit footbridge, smoking a cigarette and occasionally peering over her shoulder. The movie concludes with another backward glance, a literal invocation of