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# FROM PLATO'S CAVE TO EDWARD YANG'S CINEMA: AN EXAMINATION OF FILMIC LANGUAGE AND ITS NOETIC POTENTIAL

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EXAMINATION OF FILMIC LANGUAGE AND ITS NOETIC  
POTENTIAL**

**by**

**RUOCHEN BO**

**B.A., LIBERAL ARTS, ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE, 2014**

**THESIS**

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**ABSTRACT**

Following Jean-Louis Baudry’s incorporation of Plato’s cave allegory into the analysis of cinematic apparatus, my approach engages in a philological analysis of the films to show that various film languages embody the potential to *compel* the audience into thought reflection about transcultural, transhistorical philosophical issues. Through a close reading of two filmic texts by Edward Yang, *Yi Yi* (2000) and *Terrorizers* (1986), I will argue that certain overlooked Asian films, especially in the field of film philosophy, not only serve as artistic sites for intercultural, political and social examinations but also present thoughtful and dialectical engagement with philosophical and metaphysical difficulties – reflections about urban alienation, existential angst, the search for self-knowledge and self-awareness, etc.

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## Introduction

The relevance of Plato's cave allegory has always held a modest yet unceasing interest in film studies. Based on a close and innovative reading of the cave allegory, this thesis examines how thinking is provoked through different film languages. The complexity of this question is rooted in the fact that Plato appears to banish the poets from his ideal polis, yet still employs a great amount of myths, narrative drama, and poetry in his philosophic writings. The fundamental similarity between Plato's cave and the modern cinematic apparatus is key to my suggested reading of the noetic potential of cinema. In contrast to the conventional practice of scholars who examine this question mainly in the context of Western arthouse/auteur cinema, I will examine the manifestations of the proximity between image and thought in modern Taiwanese new cinema, mostly focusing on two of Edward Yang's films.

My thesis begins with a literature review of several books, articles and collections published in the past two decades that engage with the relationship between image and thought, and with the philosophical capacity of film as a medium. More specifically, I look at literatures that have taken on the relevance of Plato's cave allegory and cinema studies. Assigning the cave allegory a crucial theoretical place in my analysis, I intend to develop a method for examining filmic texts and their potential for producing noetic effects in the spectator. This method is attentive to specific film language and aesthetic elements, which I intend to apply to the examination of two filmic texts by Edward Yang in Chapters 2 and 3. In developing this method, I refer to many contemporary works of film philosophy and film theory. The examined works which are specifically related to establishing the relevance of

Plato in film theory include but are not limited to Nancy Bauer (2005), Stephen Rainey (2006), Thomas Elsaesser (2011), Miguel Amorim (2013), Nathan Andersen (2014), and Paul Coates (2015). I will engage with these writings on their insights or shortcomings while reading Plato in the context of cinematic studies. Another work that is especially relevant to my project is Robert Sinnerbrink's *New Philosophies of Film: Thinking Images* (2011).

Sinnerbrink's suggestion of a "distinctive kind of 'cinematic thinking'" (5) is illuminating in that it urges an approach focusing on the aesthetic elements of particular films. Along similar lines, I will work out the implications of Baudry's comparison of Plato's cave allegory with the modern cinematic apparatus by exploring how certain films in fact provide unique cinematic contributions to thinking and reflecting about fundamental human problems concerning love, death and self-knowledge.

Following Jean-Louis Baudry's belief that in order to understand cinema's persuasive power and the cinematic effect, it is necessary to examine the apparatus that it constitutes, chapter I will expand on his comparison between the scene of Plato's cave and the cinematic apparatus, thereby revealing the power of cinema to provoke thoughts, reflections and awareness. Baudry's approach to the uncanny resemblance between Plato's cave and the cinematic condition is mainly psychoanalytical – it aims to pose the problem of the exact nature of this transcendental and transhistorical desire to produce an apparatus capable of fabricating an impression of reality. I, on the other hand, am interested in seeking a parallel progression, from the cave to metaphysical truths on one end, and from the experience of film-viewing to reflections on art, medium, and self on the other. An analysis of the positioning of the spectator within the cinematic apparatus and the construction and communication of filmic language will illuminate the following implication: the unique



aspects of this art medium are capable of making cinema self-conscious about its power and effects, and the invisible condition that we live in, thus provoking the spectator into thoughts and reflections. This implication, as will be seen in the analysis of Yang's films, takes on a more substantial and clear form – his film languages do not simply provoke vague thoughts, but a specific form of reflection that is self-knowledge.

I will respond to Noel Carroll's criticism of Baudry's apparatus theory by incorporating his objection while developing my own theory. A close reading of Plato's text on the cave allegory will show that Carroll's gripe against Baudry's "romanticism" overlooks the rich implications of the analogy that Baudry is drawing between Plato's cave and the modern cinematic apparatus. The conceptual element that my thesis expounds is derived from my attention to the specific vocabulary Plato uses to describe the experience of the prisoners in the cave – his subtle suggestion of the role of *compulsion* in the process from being chained and viewing the shadows on the wall to gaining freedom, attaining enlightenment and standing outside the cave. It is this compulsive power that I believe to be present in certain film languages that needs to be further examined. In making a rejoinder to Carroll's dissatisfaction with Baudry for not taking the context of Plato's argument into account, I analyze the context of the allegory on three distinct levels. Most importantly, I wish to make manifest the idea that *compulsion* plays a significant role in leading to reflection, not only of external concepts, but also inwardly, of self-knowledge. This reading is supported by the often overlooked notion that the enterprise of the *Republic* seeks to found a just city but fundamentally engages with the idea of what a just soul is. All the conversations that take place between Socrates and the interlocutors involve the guided thinking which *compels* the interlocutors to confront their own opinions and prejudices as

merely opinions instead of truth. Only after reaching *aporia* can proper thinking and pursuit of truth be initiated. Therefore, obtaining self-knowledge, knowing what one is and is not, what one knows and does not know, and what one desires and fears is the necessary ritual one has to perform in order to know and contemplate, in the truest sense. This self-knowledge is precisely what I believe Yang's film language is capable of provoking, and the analysis of it will be continued in Chapters 2 and 3.

In addition, this chapter establishes a dialogue between different film theorists who have expressed optimism in the dialectic relationship between image and thought, and identified it as a key aspect of the power of cinema, e.g., Eisenstein, Deleuze, Badiou, et al. Building on the existing discourse, I further examine how different filmic gestures (montage, long takes, close-ups, jump cuts, use of or refusal to use shot/reverse-shot structures, etc.) position and affect the spectator, and how those cinematic gestures depend on voyeuristic gazes to achieve different layers of identification or distancing.

It seems that most scholars who write on cinematic image and thinking are liable to restrict their interest mostly to Western classical and/or arthouse films. Chapters 2 and 3 constitute my attempt to show that philosophical inquiries regarding the nature of filmic knowledge will be illuminated by examining certain Asian films. As one of the leading auteurs of the Taiwan New Cinema, Edward Yang made seven features in his lifetime that consistently engage with the conflict between modernization and tradition, urbanization, alienation and other philosophical themes. Yang's films contribute to the ongoing discussions regarding knowledge, art and life in a poignant and uniquely filmic way.

I will also demonstrate that a reading built on the lens of philosophy unveils a more adequate understanding of those texts. Methodologically, my thesis also contrasts with the

conventional research approach that emphasizes first and foremost the historical and social background in which the author produces the artworks, by foregrounding intensely the aesthetics of art and their epistemological implications.<sup>1</sup> I will argue that Yang, situated in the intersections between the postmodern landscape and a humanistic desire to overcome the fragmentation and alienation fostered in the postmodern condition, attempts to transcend the problematic subject/object divide from within, through his uses of postmodern tropes, codes and aesthetics.

Chapter II uses Edward Yang's *Yi Yi* (2000) as the primary site for textual analysis. Moving from a broad theoretical framework that engages with the abstract relationship between film language and thinking, Chapters II and III ground the analysis in a more specific realm of questions, namely the postmodern and globalized condition in urban landscapes and its effects on their inhabitants. I will show by analyzing this last feature of Yang's, that the modern condition of our fragmentation and alienation can be revealed through specific cinematic techniques; instead of being unconsciously worked upon, the spectator is forced to confront these conditions undistractedly. Chapter II is divided into three parts - the three languages that I identify as instrumental in evoking thoughts and reflections about the self and the postmodern condition. Section I examines Yang's peculiar use of glass reflections in several crucial scenes. I will argue that his meticulous positioning of characters, the glass reflections of them and of the city lights serve to construct a complicated

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<sup>1</sup> For detailed descriptions of the social/historical background of Yang's films, see Jameson's "Remapping Taipei" in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (1992); Chang's "The Terrorizer and the Great Divide in Contemporary Taiwan's Cultural Development" in *Island on the Edge: Taiwan New Cinema and After* (2005); and Liu's "Taiwan's Cold War Geopolitics in Edward Yang's *The Terrorizers*" in *Surveillance in Asian Cinema* (2017).

relationship between modern people and the world they inhabit. The seeming impossibility of the constructed image also forces the spectator to look more carefully at the image, and thereby to pay more attention to the visual details, and to contemplate the meaning that the image strives to achieve. Section 2 focuses on Yang's parallel editing, most prominent in one sequence. By uniting together two city spaces in a single temporal unit, Yang speaks to the thought that despite all the generational and cultural differences, there are experiences and reflections that unify and bond us all. Section III investigates a part of film language that is not visual, yet equally crucial to cinema – sound. More specifically, it mainly looks at how examples of voice-off deepen the diegetic space, and how sound bridges relate different characters through a continuous consciousness. The diegetic/non-diegetic ambiguities that these sound effects create compel the spectator to reflect on the situation in which the characters find themselves. The situation is a modern one, and a human one, that we all confront in our existence at this historical point.

The last feature of Yang's shows maturity in both his reflection on life and his aesthetic vision of art. It is the combination of these two things that makes the film most appropriate for the analysis of the philosophical implications of film language. However, his aesthetic genius in composing the film languages does not only materialize at the end of his career. Chapter III considers one of Yang's earlier works, *The Terrorizers* (1986), which exhibits stylistic differences with respect to later works, yet remains intensely thoughtful and reflective. The first part of Chapter III looks at a film language that has a prominent role in this earlier work but is absent from *Yi Yi* – the use of close-ups. Yang's attention to human faces creates a dimension that penetrates the human soul, exemplified in his portrayal of different female characters' faces through different media. His conscious choice of mise-en-

scène is also scrutinized in this part of the chapter. The color of the background, wardrobe, position of props, etc. all serve to invoke fundamental questions such as the possibility of love, the discrepancy between external expectation and our own desires, and the relationship between fiction and reality, art and life. The second part of this chapter engages with Frederic Jameson's influential essay on *The Terrorizers*, analyzed through a postmodern theoretical framework. My thesis offers a detailed reading and understanding of his arguments and inspired observations, which, despite the essay's considerable impact in both fields of studies in postmodernism and Taiwanese cinema, has never been discussed in depth. Ultimately, I will contest Jameson's idea of the death of the subject and a localized understanding of the urban spatiality in the film, with the belief that the universality in Yang's film transcends the specific social, political and historical framework. I will support this reading through an original analysis of the similarity between one frame of this film and one of Van Gogh's paintings, famously analyzed by Heidegger for its potential to reveal truth and being.

After developing the relevance of Plato's cave allegory in cinema studies, I expand the conventional practice of supporting this philosophical framework by looking at certain Western films to incorporate Taiwanese new cinema. Through the close analysis of Edward Yang's two films, I hope to show that our awareness of ourselves and our condition can be enhanced by certain film languages: the collision between montage fragments, the disembodied perspective, the transcendental subject and the unfolding of time and space in an entirely revolutionary way. In other words, I hope to reveal the possibility that the aesthetic elements in film are compelling not only affectively, but also noetically.

## **Chapter I:**

### **Plato's Cave and the Noetic Effects of Cinematic Apparatus**

#### **Part 1: Theoretical Background**

Ever since Münsterberg articulated the psychological and aesthetic uniqueness of cinematic experience in early 20<sup>th</sup> century, expressing one of the earliest instances of the “film/mind analogy”,<sup>2</sup> philosophical interest in film has been growing slowly but steadily. In the 1970s, Cavell attempted to put the clear division between the disciplines of Film and Philosophy into question – he claims that both film and philosophy are concerned with skepticism and ways to overcome it.<sup>3</sup> Under his inspiration, the diverging views on the exact scope of film to “do philosophy” have been substantially discussed and fiercely debated in the past decade.

Mulhall pushes from the general idea of accessing and studying the philosophy of film towards advocating film as philosophizing.<sup>4</sup> He believes in the philosophic power and agency of certain films to reflect on the conditions of the possibility of cinema. The activeness, questioning attitude and reflecting mode towards its own nature is in fact a crucial essence of philosophy as a discipline. Therefore, he argues that one can examine certain films (his selections remain largely Hollywood Science Fictions) as philosophical in their own right: as genuinely and thoughtfully engaging with philosophically charged questions through both narrative content and film forms as a whole.

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<sup>2</sup> Carroll, 1988. And Münsterberg, 1916. Münsterberg draws the analogy between film language and psychological acts of consciousness, e.g. close-up resembles paying attention, flashback corresponds to recollection, and flash forward is like imagination, etc.

<sup>3</sup> Cavell, 1979.

<sup>4</sup> Mulhall, 2008. Part II, Chapter V, 130-132.

The level of faith in cinema's philosophizing power that is close to Mulhall's position can be characterized as the "bold thesis", most clearly stated and defended by Smuts: films can make innovative, independent contributions to philosophy through means that are exclusive to cinema.<sup>5</sup> He argues that based on both epistemic and artistic criteria, film can provide analogical arguments that contribute to philosophical debate. While Sorfa also takes this as an assumption of the field of film-philosophy,<sup>6</sup> both Livingston and Wartenberg contest and deny the more extreme stance and both maintain a more moderate view of cinema's role in developing philosophical insight or knowledge. Livingston contends that the value of film lies in its ability to "provide vivid and emotionally engaging illustrations of philosophical issues and ideas, and, when sufficient background assumptions are in place, reflections about films can contribute to the exploration of specific theses and arguments, sometimes yielding enhanced philosophical understanding";<sup>7</sup> Wartenberg adopts the "moderate pro-cinematic philosophy position"<sup>8</sup> by focusing on specific techniques that filmmakers can employ to do philosophy on film (the most prominent example being the thought experiment), but he opposes the idea that filmmakers and philosophers proceed in the same way.

The disagreements ultimately center on the ontological questions of what film is and what philosophy is. The exact definition of either would be too daunting a task for the scope of this thesis. However, I intend to engage with a problem that can be informed by both disciplines, namely the relationship between film language and thought. More specifically, I

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<sup>5</sup> Smuts, 409

<sup>6</sup> Sorfa, 3. "Film-Philosophy supports the strong argument that cinema can do philosophy in a way that is unique to the medium. Therefore, film is not only capable of presenting extended thought experiments or illustrating philosophical concepts, but is philosophy itself."

<sup>7</sup> Livingston, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Wartenberg, 166.

would like to examine the relevance of Plato's cave allegory and in what way it can illuminate the studies of cinema. In this chapter, assigning a central place to the cave allegory, I will develop a method for examining filmic texts and their potential for producing noetic effects in the spectator. This method will focus on specific film language and aesthetic elements, which I intend to use as a lens for the examination of two films by Edward Yang that will constitute the remainder of my thesis.

Some of the scholarly debates on more specifically the relationship between film and knowledge have been instructive to my thinking. The collection of essays edited by Stoehr (2002) puts forth the idea that the textual complexity of cinema makes it an ideal medium for examining fundamental questions such as the nature of knowledge, perceiving the world and the self. Among the essays in the collection, Lee argues that Chris Marker's *La Jetée* can be read as an allegory to parallel Plato's own cave allegory, thereby provoking a discussion on Platonic essentialism.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Bauer argues that David Fincher's *Fight Club* exercises a resistance to Plato's and Descartes' vision regarding the relationship between passion and reason.<sup>10</sup> It is clear that scholars have used films to discuss Platonic philosophical themes, but my project differs from these discussions in that I am not looking for discussions of Platonic philosophy in films, but foregrounding Plato's allegory in order to explore what implications this allegory could bring to the examination of film language and how it leads to knowledge and reflections.

Along these lines, Robert Sinnerbrink's book *New Philosophies of Film: Thinking Images* (2011) provides a supportive foundation for my working method in film analysis,

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<sup>9</sup> Lee, in *Film and Knowledge* (2002), 95-101.

<sup>10</sup> Bauder, in *Film As Philosophy* (2005), 39-56.



especially his suggestion that a “distinctive kind of ‘cinematic thinking’”<sup>11</sup> can be recognized in certain films and the idea that proper understanding of film-philosophy is arrived at not by a pure cognitivist-analytic or emotive stance, but an approach that focuses on the aesthetics of particular films. This urges the spectator to focus on the specific film languages: different visual styles, narrative structures, framing, camera positions and movement, employment of or conscious disowning of generic cinematographic and editing conventions, etc. The emphasis on scrutinizing the aesthetic language and effects will be a crucial part of examining the concept of compulsion derived from my reading of Plato’s cave allegory. Additionally, I will take Sinnerbrink’s acute and timely meditation to a more extreme and yet more appropriate level: “In a global cultural and economic marketplace dominated by certain types of stories or ideological points of view, there is ethical purpose in devoting attention to more marginal, more questioning, more aesthetically and intellectually demanding films that one encounters.”<sup>12</sup> I believe that his shortcoming lies in that he, as most scholars who write on cinematic image and thinking are liable to do, restricts his interest mostly to Western classical and/or arthouse films.<sup>13</sup> Not only do I hope to show that philosophical inquiries regarding the nature of filmic knowledge will benefit from looking at certain Asian films, but also to demonstrate that a reading that builds on the lens of philosophy will bring out a more adequate understanding of those texts.

In this chapter, I will work out the implications of Baudry’s comparison of Plato’s cave allegory with the modern cinematic apparatus – namely film language’s noetic potential

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<sup>11</sup> Sinnerbrink, 5.

<sup>12</sup> Sinnerbrink, 139.

<sup>13</sup> Like other philosopher who are interested in the existence of a specific cinematic knowledge, Sinnerbrink also chooses to engage with mainly American and European directors. In the entire (fairly broad and impressive) filmography, only eight Asian movies were mentioned out of 162 titles.

in compelling thoughts and reflections. In the following two chapters, I will explore how certain films in fact provide unique cinematic contributions to thinking and reflecting about fundamental human problems concerning love, death and self-knowledge, using specific film works by Edward Yang.

## **Part 2: Baudry and Plato's Cave (Background)**

As Jean-Louis Baudry observes in his seminal essay, "One constantly returns to the scene of the cave."<sup>14</sup> He sees certain uncanny and curious similarities between the cinematic apparatus and Plato's cave analogy: both embody motor inhibition as an essential character, both involve a projector higher in the back and a screen/wall in the front, and most importantly, both produce images and representations that can be taken as perceptions of reality. The analogy between Plato's cave and modern sound cinema is crucial to Baudry's analysis of the cinematic apparatus from a Freudian psychoanalytic perspective. The former analogy points to a transhistorical, psychical and instinctual desire of creating an apparatus capable of fabricating an impression of reality, which lends legitimacy to the operation of breaking down this deep-rooted and inherent desire manifested in both modern and proto-cinematic apparatus. Baudry then moves on to establish the analogy between cinema and dreams and to use this correlation to understand cinema's persuasive power, namely its satisfaction of the prototypical desire, deeply ingrained in the regression to the stage of primitive narcissism, where the hallucinatory satisfaction of desire is produced.<sup>15</sup> Regardless

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<sup>14</sup> Baudry, 171.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

of the adequacy of the correlation,<sup>16</sup> the gesture of returning to Plato's cave in understanding the cinematic effect on the spectator remains illuminating and worthy of further examination.

Heeding Thomas Elsaesser's appeal to re-examine Baudry's apparatus theory, to re-read and re-situate classic theoretical texts including Plato's allegory of the cave,<sup>17</sup> I would like to engage in a dialogue with recent scholarship reviving the relevance of Plato in film analysis, including Miguel Amorim (2013), Paul Coates (2015), Stephen Rainey's chapter in *From Plato's Cave to the Multiplex* (2006), Alain Badiou's new translation of Plato's *The Republic*, and Nathan Andersen's parallel analysis of Plato's cave and *A Clockwork Orange*.<sup>18</sup> Despite Rainey's positive conclusion that the nature of reality in film is the representation of different points-of-view, and there is a "parallel between ordinary knowledge and that derived from film,"<sup>19</sup> his analysis regarding the dissimilarity between Platonic knowledge and cinematic experience is ill-founded. His reading of Platonic epistemology is based on a superficial and careless reading of the cave allegory. By projecting a clear and unbridgeable dichotomy between inside of the cave and outside, he overlooks the rich implications of the process of ascending and being made to come back to the cave even after seeing the sun. The "ideal Cosmic Exile"<sup>20</sup> is a grandiose claim that results from not examining Plato's text attentively, which is brimful of layers, nuances and subtleties. The untenability of this ideal Cosmic point of view is well conceptualized by

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<sup>16</sup> For the most heated criticism of Baudry's arguments and hypothesis, see Noël Carroll's attack (Carroll, page 189-205), which takes Baudry's analysis very literally, and criticizes the latter's "woefully inept" and "loose and superficial" analogies.

<sup>17</sup> Elsaesser, 34-35, 41. In this short paper, Elsaesser eloquently portrays the paradoxical productivity of classical texts and theory, including Baudry's apparatus theory. He encourages new and creative reflections on the historical cinematic apparatus and the *dispositifs* to understand spectatorship and cinematic power in the current age of digital media.

<sup>18</sup> See Andersen, Chapter 2: Plato's Cave and Cinema.

<sup>19</sup> Rainey, 104.

<sup>20</sup> Rainey, 101.

Plato, as one of many pieces of evidence indicates: the mere mysterious and puzzling instruction in the education of the philosophers in Book VII of the Republic that forces the philosophers to go back to the cave.

This chapter builds on Baudry's comparison between the scene of Plato's cave and the cinematic apparatus. Yet instead of focusing on the similarities between the dream state and the condition produced by cinema, I will incorporate Carroll's criticism of Baudry and take the context of the myth of the cave into account.<sup>21</sup> However, against Carroll's dismissal of Baudry's hypothesis for not being "scientific" enough,<sup>22</sup> I will argue that the comparison is rich in its implications and extremely helpful in unfolding the noetic potential of the cinematic apparatus. In this respect, I share Coates' sentiment principally, that Baudry's work on 'the cinematographic apparatus' is "stimulating but problematic," to which he contrasts the "possibly even more problematic critique by Noël Carroll."<sup>23</sup> Coates elegantly shows that Carroll's major criticism of Baudry – the abuse of analogy (and therefore belletrism and sloppy arguments, common to most "continental" philosophy and theory) – does not recognize that the similarities between the different objects that Baudry draws attention to are sufficient to be significant. The dissimilarities between relevant analogies of 1) film viewing and dream state, 2) cinematic experience and Plato's cave should not be deemed as automatically invalidating the comparison. To develop this positive observation, I will argue that similar to the experience in cave, film is equipped with a language that can demonstrate and shape our visions of the world. Against Amorim's sentiment in his expansive yet trivializing list of what he terms as "the Republic's fatigued allegory imports

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<sup>21</sup> Carroll, 195.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>23</sup> Coates, 44.

into the theory of cinema”<sup>24</sup> and the problems of its exercise by many thinkers, including but not limited to Rosenbaum, Epstein, Baudry, Gaudreault, Badiou, Nancy and Cavell, I intend to show the fruitfulness of using this allegory in thinking about the nature of cinema. The act of continuous inscription and re-inscription of Plato’s legendary cave analogy in the history of philosophical discussions, literary theories and film theories is an indication of its inexhaustibility and ever-relevance to our reflections on “the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry,”<sup>25</sup> Apollo and Dionysus, reason and inspiration, sense and sensibility. Instead of simply rejecting its fertility with bitterness, we should look into the core of the issue (and the writing) with patience, humility and open-mindedness.

Thus, *pace* Benjamin, who believes that the absent-minded public only receives film in a state of distraction,<sup>26</sup> I hope to show that cinematic language is rich in noetic potential and that it neither seeks to be a mere imitation of reality nor attempts to pass as reality, but can make the spectator aware of the apparatus that he is positioned in, critically engages with the world we inhabit, and compels the viewing subject to participate in that engagement actively. Filmic representations have the potential to lead the spectator to a reflective mode of existence, and by doing so to liberate the spectator from the imprisoned state of ignorance.

### **Part 3: Baudry and Plato’s Cave (Analysis)**

Baudry’s analysis of the physical condition of Plato’s cave is quite thorough: the chained condition of the prisoners renders them physically inhibited; the shadows are produced from a light source and stone and wooden objects located behind the prisoners;

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<sup>24</sup> Amorim, 601.

<sup>25</sup> Plato, Book X.

<sup>26</sup> Benjamin, 682-683, XV.

there is a projection system ingeniously constructed such that the apparatus itself is not revealed,<sup>27</sup> etc. In addition to the apparatus, Baudry also chooses to focus on the part of the Cave allegory where the philosophers have left and returned to the cave. This is an intriguing choice, but quite understandable considering his main argument. Baudry wants to use the reaction of the fellow prisoners to the returned and enlightened philosophers to emphasize the obstinate aspect of the prisoners: they are so resolute in their unwillingness to leave the chained condition, and “they might put to death anyone trying to lead them out.”<sup>28</sup> For Baudry, this strong resistance to stay in this condition of motor inhibition implicates “the compulsion to repeat, the return to a former condition,”<sup>29</sup> in other words, regression to an early stage of development which later proves significant to his understanding of the underlying desire that cinema satisfies. I would like to examine the part of Plato’s cave analogy that Baudry glosses over, if mentioned at all, which will shed a different light on Baudry’s analogy between dreams and cinema. The passage we will examine is in between the two parts which Baudry chooses to focus on from Plato’s text: the process of the chained prisoner breaking free of the bonds and finally leaving the cave. Building on Baudry’s claim that “a same apparatus was responsible for the invention of the cinema and was already present in Plato,”<sup>30</sup> an exploration of what Plato’s cave can perhaps speak to what modern cinema is able to achieve.

Book VII of Plato’s *Republic* opens with the famous allegory of the cave – one of the most fascinating and dramatic passages in Plato’s entire corpus. Interestingly, in Badiou’s

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<sup>27</sup> Baudry, 175, “placed otherwise, the fire would transmit the reflections of the prisoner themselves most prominently onto the screen ...”

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 174. Also, in Plato’s text, this can be understood as a reference to Socrates’s execution by his fellow Athenians, and the inherent difficulty of his concept of the Philosopher-King.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

recent translation of the *Republic*, he takes the liberty to translate the allegory of the cave into a literal movie theatre.<sup>31</sup> Before getting into the details of the descriptions of the experience in the cave, it is necessary first to contextualize the analogy within the *Republic*. Book VI establishes the argument that philosophers are best able to lead and should rule the city because they love what *is* rather than what *seems to be*, and are therefore better able to know the truth and have practical knowledge by which to rule. Glaucon responds that philosophers are either useless or bad people (487a-d), to which Socrates responds that they are rather misunderstood (487e-489a), or—and this is a crucial point—poorly trained. Those with the character and natural abilities to become philosophers, if poorly educated, can turn out to be spectacularly evil (491b-e). After warning against false ‘philosophers’ and reasserting the possibility of philosophers ruling in a hypothetically just city, Socrates speaks about the proper education for a philosopher (502c, ff.), and focuses on the importance of “the form of the good” (505a). What follows are a series of three analogies: the sun, the mathematical line, and finally, the cave, all of which aim at explaining what the “good” is and how the philosopher needs to reorient his attention from shadows to objects, i.e., from appearances of this world to the ideal forms that they participate in.

Socrates continues from his illustration of what genuine philosophical understanding would be to relate philosophy to everyday life and to provide an account of the proper education for philosophers. He does this by means of the allegory of the cave. Socrates starts with descriptions of the general physical condition of the cave, which Baudry has paid sufficient attention to in his essay (as mentioned above). These people will hold truth to be

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<sup>31</sup> Badiou, 212. Socrates: “Imagine an enormous movie theater. Down front, the screen, which goes right up to the ceiling (but it’s so high that everything up there gets lost in the dark) blocks anything other than itself from being seen...”

nothing more than the shadows. Now the most peculiar action launches – how one gets out of this condition/the release of the prisoners from their bonds. Mysteriously, it just spontaneously happens.

From 515c3 to 516a3, Socrates puts forth a picture of a painful process of a man being released and dragged out of the cave. This short passage is filled with force, violence, pain, and compulsion. The man is first “compelled to” stand up, to turn his neck around, to walk and look up toward the light. Then, after being shown each thing of which the shadows are, he is compelled to answer questions about what they are. Afterwards he will be compelled to look at the light (of the fire) itself, which necessarily causes intense pain and makes him desire to turn back to the shadows as they don’t cause discomfort and are thus easier to make out clearly. The word “to compel” is used three times in this short passage,<sup>32</sup> and it is at this point that the philosopher-to-be is dragged by force out of the cave into the light of the sun, an explicit and specific form of compulsion.

Hence, compulsion is a crucial feature in the process of how one gets out of the condition of imprisonment, from staring at the shadows and taking them to be everything there *is*, to turning around and seeing more clearly the apparatus that creates the representations, and to eventually getting out of the cave. A close reading of Plato’s text reveals the necessity of compulsion and its imposed violence and pain in this initial stage.<sup>33</sup> Realizing that the shadow on the wall is not the only thing there is, but that it is rather an

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<sup>32</sup> Plato, Book VII, 515a, ἡναγκασμένοι; 515c, ἀναγκάζοιτο; 515d, ἀναγκάζου; all coming from the verb ἀναγκάζω (to force, to compel).

<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, the language of compulsion drops when out of the cave. After being in the realm of natural things and the sun, the language of compulsion disappears: the man would “most easily make out the shadows...and later, the things themselves” and from there “he could turn to beholding the things in heaven and heaven itself” (516a). The person is able to exercise his own agency, actively and willingly explore the realm, and to move towards that which is the source of being and all the Forms.



image of a sensible object, is definitely painful and momentous, but it does not seem to provide sufficient motivation for the ex-prisoner to pursue higher understanding. Without compulsion, he might not be able to realize that the sensible objects themselves are not all there is, that there is something higher and not ephemeral or physical. In addition, the looming danger that he might retreat to his former ignorant but comfortable state further shows the weakness in the soul's ability to insist on exploring and contemplating. In other words, when there is no compulsion, at best this person will be stuck in the realm of sensible objects and no higher, but more likely he will wish to return to his original prison seat.

Addressing Carroll's criticism of Baudry,<sup>34</sup> there are at least three layers of context in this allegory. First, within the cave analogy, we start with the apparatus – the underground, dark and motion-inhibited place, much like modern sound cinema, and eventually we get to a higher intellectual place where our understanding of the apparatus itself, the shadow representations and thereby the world itself is more illumined. Second, as Socrates suggests in the first sentence of Book VII, the cave analogy is supposed to be “an image of our nature in its education and want of education.”<sup>35</sup> Different stages in the cave and out of the cave correspond to different levels of reflection, thinking and educated-ness (in the broadest sense). In the context of Socrates engaging in a dialogue with young Athenians, the cave serves as a metaphor for our educational status. In addition, Plato uses this allegory to communicate to us, the active readers, that in the end of the reading the cave and reflecting about the cave, we can arrive at a place closer to truth. Regardless of which layer we are dwelling on, the apparatus of the cave can always function as a site for *episteme* that makes

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<sup>34</sup> Carroll, 195: “Rather, Baudry tears the myth of the cave out of the context in which it functions as an allegory...”

<sup>35</sup> Bloom, 193.

the prisoners or the readers more enlightened and strive to live a more just and virtuous life. This is where Baudry's ingenious emphasis on the similarities between the cave and cinema could flourish with rich potentialities. In other words, the cinematic viewing experience can be similar to the cave in its potential in provoking thoughts and reflections. The relationship between the prisoners positioned in the cave, and the spectator positioned in the cinema can be an analogous one. Therefore, the understanding of the apparatus of the former should be able to inform the power and efficacy of the latter.

As analyzed above, compulsion plays an important role in pushing forth the prisoners' epistemological progress. It remains mysterious who or what is doing the compelling, and whether it is purely external coercion or some form of internal urge to know the truth or even a mixture of the two. A better understanding of Plato's use of this concept requires a much more rigorous engagement with a larger portion of the text, which lies outside the scope of this thesis. But for the current discussion, it suffices to know that this kind of ambiguity and paradox can be found in the spectatorial effect of the cinema – that certain filmic language and representation can exert forces of compulsion that lead to reflection and thinking.

On a similar note, Andersen, in his recently published work on film-philosophy (2014), proposes an approach that takes the entire experience of film into account in understanding cinematic intelligibility. After pointing out the unconventional elements of cinema such as breaking the fourth wall and jump cuts, he claims: "in this case, we have an image that shows itself to be an image, a shadow that shows itself to be a shadow and thereby provokes those, enthralled by the shadows, to reflect upon their workings."<sup>36</sup> Andersen

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<sup>36</sup> Andersen, N., 53.

argues that in order to understand the illuminating light better, we have to take a closer look at the shadows. His emphasis on close reading is admirable, yet his focus on one film and one major philosophical text is hermeneutically limited. Looking at different film languages in filmic texts from different times and places, my argument and analysis stem from the other side of this spectatorial relationship. While he encourages the viewer to look at the shadow differently, I examine the compulsive power inherent to the shadow in affecting the spectator.

#### **Part 4: Cinema and Thought**

In terms of the relationship between film and thoughts, one is necessarily reminded of Eisenstein's optimism in the effect of montage to produce thoughts and concepts. Inspired by examples of Japanese hieroglyphics, Eisenstein wished to implement the idea of two independent ideographic characters juxtaposing and exploding into a concept in the cinema. His vision of montage is "not an idea composed of successive shots stuck together but an idea that DERIVES from the collision between two shots that are independent of one another."<sup>37</sup> For Eisenstein, it is through this language that a purely intellectual film will emerge, "freed from traditional limitations, [and it] will achieve direct forms for thoughts, systems and concepts without any transitions or paraphrases."<sup>38</sup>

Eisenstein's film *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) speaks to his theory. The famous "Odessa Steps" sequence effectively exemplifies the collision and juxtaposition between the contrary forces. Front and back shots of the unarmed mass fleeing in utter chaos are juxtaposed against the orderly and willful movement of the Tsarist soldiers. Intercut between

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<sup>37</sup> Eisenstein, 27.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

shots of a massive group fleeing in desperation are close-ups of different individuals' body parts: the falling knees of a man who is shot; the faces of shock, terror and unbelief of two or three people hiding behind the steps; the boy who is shot with his hands and body trampled by the hysterical crowd; his mother's face of utter despair; the older woman and her broken pince-nez; the famous baby carriage, etc. The rhythm of the shots varies according to the content as well as the intensity of the conflict. All of these detailed elements collide with intermittent shots of the faceless crowd and the machine-like firing soldiers. The other prominent juxtaposition lies in the ingenious confrontations between intersecting diagonals and other geometrical shapes created by lines of soldiers standing, pointed guns, shadows and stone steps. The spectator directly encounters the conflict between the suppressing authority and the mass, group and individual, violence and innocence, hope and despair, life and death. The visual confrontation between each shot is so powerful that an organic unity arises out of the separate shots taken together. This kind of gestalt lies essentially in the relationship between the individual shots and is thus, according to Eisenstein's theory, most effectively done by moving pictures.

Eisensteinian montage emerges as a provocative visual metaphor, the essence of which is grander than all its elements individually or combined together. What is directly perceived is not only each shot itself, but also the juxtaposition between each consecutive shot. The overwhelming effect of the sequence thus lingers in our mind and forces us to contemplate how the effect is achieved. This intensity of emotion achieved through artistic representation will perhaps not lead directly to revolution or action on the spot, as Eisenstein had hoped, but it will provoke the spectator to reflect upon this overwhelming intensity.

What Eisenstein does not spell out behind the magical force of montage is the inherent role of space and time presented in the sequences. Montage juxtaposes different camera angles shooting different objects at different positions and sometimes different times, all closely packed against one another, without giving the spectator a moment to breathe. The compression of space and time heightens the tension and draws out the essential qualia latent in each shot. The manipulation of space and time is crucial in filmic language, and it plays a key role in compelling the spectator into reflection. There is a valiant power in certain filming and editing techniques that could render the heretofore unconscious and unknown realms unveiled and knowable.

As Benjamin explicates in his influential essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,”

by close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring common place milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action.<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, Balázs offers an analogous wonder at the language of close-ups. Balázs believes that the face of man has a unique power in revealing the world and our profound experiences in it. Film makes a discovery of the human face, thus creating a penetrating and new dimension of the soul – the world of microphysiognomy. The close-ups or extreme close-ups, as part of the cinematography of a film, render it possible for the spectators to move in the spiritual dimension of facial expression. Dreyer’s *The Passion of Joan of Arc* serves as an optimal example illustrating this concept. Throughout the film we directly perceive, oftentimes overwhelmingly, the constant juxtaposition of fear and judgment, faith and non-

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<sup>39</sup> Benjamin, 680.

belief, strength and weakness of will, spontaneity and contemplated pretention – all through the honest language of human faces. Photography first gives it a try-out but it is the motion and conflict between each facial expression that overwhelms and makes the spectator aware of its effect. Whether we are “the disembodied viewpoint”<sup>40</sup> or the “all-perceiving subject,”<sup>41</sup> close-ups and similarly slow-motion sequences, fulfill our desire to be omnipotent voyeurs. This language enables us to observe the world without being seen.<sup>42</sup> Thus, this technique is extremely rich in motivating us to explore the world that is inaccessible to the naked eye. This same power under a different light can be understood as performing a distancing effect on the spectator as well.

Close-ups and especially extreme close-ups are unnatural, rendered possible only through technological development (e.g., the telephoto lens). A very small space is occupied, but greatly expanded. It creates a means of perception that disaccords with how we usually interact with the world. A close-up on a still object creates wonder and nourishes our desire to observe and learn, but human faces when blown up can intimidate and cause intense discomfort. This further leads to an uneasiness that could develop into a Brechtian estrangement effect (albeit not to the level of action) that makes the spectator aware of the apparatus and the situation depicted.

However, shots with apparent movement and obvious manipulation of space and time are not the only ones that compel the spectator to reflect. Still camera and long takes can equally be thought provoking. Deleuze’s acute observation and analysis regarding Italian

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<sup>40</sup> Carroll, in “Towards an Ontology of the Moving Image,” asks whether film has an essence, or a set of essential features, or a set of necessary conditions. The main body of the article identifies four necessary conditions for motion pictures. And this is the first one: it possesses a disembodied viewpoint (or is a detached display).

<sup>41</sup> Metz, 696.

<sup>42</sup> Cavell, 40.

neo-realism, French New Wave and Japanese cinema are especially pertinent to our discussion. The “movement-image” in classic cinema functions on the level of the sensory-motor, thus producing the representative image of thought. In other words, only through representation and recognition are our thoughts formed in reaction to classic cinema. This mechanism renders it impossible to think the unthinkable, reflect on things we haven’t reflected upon or contemplate the real difference in our situation. But when cinema achieves its own auto-temporalization and unfolds time in itself instead of through its subjugation to movement, cinema fully actualizes its potential for thinking and engages with the spectator in a purely cinematic logic that goes beyond representation.

When analyzing Ozu’s pillow-shots,<sup>43</sup> Deleuze explains: “An empty space owes its importance above all to the absence of a possible content, whilst the still life is defined by the presence and composition of objects which are wrapped up in themselves or become their own container.”<sup>44</sup> We see a still vase for more than 10 seconds, during which nothing seems to happen.<sup>45</sup> It is from this nothingness that something profound emerges. As Deleuze describes: “This is time, time itself, ‘a little time in its pure state’: a direct time-image, which gives what changes the unchanging form in which the change is produced.”<sup>46</sup> It is different from a still photograph, as one of the ontological characters of film is an anticipation of movement.<sup>47</sup> Here we have a movement that is essentially imperceptible. The still object endures duration – each moment signifies a change, a change in time, of time, an ontological

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<sup>43</sup> Burch, 160, 163. ‘Cutaway still-lifes’ with an absence of people.

<sup>44</sup> Deleuze, 233.

<sup>45</sup> See *An Autumn Afternoon* (1962) for examples of Ozu’s pillow-shots.

<sup>46</sup> Deleuze, 234.

<sup>47</sup> Carroll, in “Towards an Ontology of the Moving Image,” identifies this as the second essence of film: it is reasonable to anticipate movement in the film (on first viewing).

change that cannot be physically perceived. It is at these moments we are compelled to thoughts, as physical sensory perception fails us – thus liberating us from its tyranny.

In *An Autumn Afternoon* (1962) by Yasujiro Ozu, we are confronted with an indifferent flow of life in which time never ceases its motion because the moment is privileged or important. All the clocks in the different frames throughout the entire film serve as a constant reminder of this cold fact. After the conversation between the father and the beautifully dressed daughter, we have a 20-second long take of the room in which all four characters are leaving for the wedding. The pillow shot afterwards closes this sequence and is imbued with the formal consciousness of Ozu's artistic genius. We see a long shot with deep space of the empty room where the daughter used to live. To the left of the frame is the mirror in front of which Michiko is sitting before the father enters. It is a prolonged and 'unmotivated' shot which ends in another prolonged close-up of the red chair and the mirror. The peculiarity of this shot is so powerful, that it produces a "tension between the suspension of human presence (of the diegesis) and its potential return."<sup>48</sup> This shot of the inanimate object in the room, newly unpossessed, initiates the spectator into a direct relation with the diegesis. The camera's look does not belong to any of the characters. It therefore produces a less mediated spectator's look – on the one hand, we wonder about what is happening now at the wedding and, on the other hand, we think about what will happen to this room later, anticipating the sadness that has already saturated the empty room. This shot de-centers the diegesis from the characters and thus becomes a strong suturing moment. The spectator "wonders why the frame is what it is"<sup>49</sup> and is given a luxury to stay in this moment of sentimentality and loneliness longer, to partake in a transcendental gaze that is distant yet

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<sup>48</sup> Burch, 161.

<sup>49</sup> Silverman, 221.



unified. For instance, a shot of an empty room allows us to partake in the experience of many parents who preserve the empty room of their children who have already left, and also provides for many children the opportunity to see their old room without them being present.

Just like the transformations in the cave, we begin to lose our belief in the shadows or the idea that the shadows are all there is. There is a pure time that ordinary representation or life experience does not easily reveal, that we are now confronting directly. A fascination with an image like this necessarily arises, as it simply is not what we are used to seeing. The objects and sounds in the image become autonomous, and therefore force us to think about the everyday banalities, indifference of the physical environment and flowing of time, ambiguities and irrationalities in the inscrutable forces that are unveiled in our existence. And this resembles the transformation from being chained to turning around and confronting the light source, which hurts and gives discomfort.

In light of Benjamin's crucial claim that the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence, film, an essentially modern art form, should be studied closely not only in terms of its content but also its formal structure. However, instead of Benjamin's claim that film works on the masses' reception in a state of distraction, I believe that the cinematic apparatus has the potential to transform distraction into concentration, absentminded-ness into active contemplation.

Different filmic gestures unfold time and space in a revolutionary way that overwhelms, shocks and stuns the spectator from what he is used to seeing, and this ultimately has the capacity to provoke reflection about the image itself and the concept that emerges from the juxtaposition. Through these techniques, the modern condition of our fragmentation and alienation can be revealed; instead of being unconsciously worked upon,

we are forced to confront these conditions undistractedly. Under this light, Baudry's hypothesis of the analogy between the cinematic apparatus and Plato's cave is particularly illuminating, as both, upon close examination, embody a sense of compulsion that forces the spectator into contemplation and thus moving closer to the light of truth.

To unravel fully the mesmerizing power that cinematic language is capable of, especially regarding its effect in provoking thoughts, a more detailed and holistic examination of films as a whole is required. The next two chapters will dwell on two filmic texts by Edward Yang, one of the filmmakers prominently associated with the movement of New Taiwanese Cinema, thereby providing more recent cinematic examples that inform the theoretical model established in the first chapter.

## Chapter II:

### Edward Yang's *Yi Yi* (2000)

Edward Yang's last cinematic masterpiece, released at the turn of the century, is a movingly poetic artwork that comments on the dissolution and reconstitution of our subjectivities in an increasingly global, capitalist, modern society. *Yi Yi: A One and A Two* (2000) opens with a wedding and ends with a funeral. What unfolds between love and death is anxiety, the ennui of everyday banality and all that saturates modern existence. In this chapter, I will examine closely Yang's naturalistic film language and how it re-creates the world, our modern condition, in its own image and reminds the spectator that "we are displaced from our natural habitation with it, placed at a distance from it."<sup>50</sup> I will argue that Yang's thoughtful selections of film gestures have an inherent power to convey a poignant awareness of our alienation from the world in facing love and death, while pushing us out of nihilism and towards a higher poetic sensitivity and openness in engaging with art and life, so as to make sense of the place in which we find ourselves.

This three-hour long audio-visual poem unfolds the confusion and struggles of a multigenerational family. The film starts with the wedding of A-Di and Xiao Yan, a wedding that is not desired by any one in particular, perhaps with the exception of Xiao Yan who is visibly pregnant at that point. The core of the family are A-Di's sister, Min-Min, and her husband NJ, who have two beautiful children – Ting-Ting, a kind and sensitive high school student, and Yang-Yang, an artistic and philosophical eight-year-old boy. They all live in the same apartment with Po-Po, the maternal grandmother of the two children, who never speaks

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<sup>50</sup> Cavell, 41.

a single word throughout the film. Along the narrative lines, we see their interactions with colleagues (most notably Da-Da, NJ's old schoolmate and current colleague), neighbors (Li-Li, the sensual teenage girl, her boyfriend Fatty, and her unstable family), NJ's girlfriend Sherry from back in the day, and A-Di's manipulative ex-girlfriend Yun-Yun. Yang uses mostly amateur actors because of his disappointment in the shallowness of the acting pool in Taiwan,<sup>51</sup> but manages to extract wonderful performances, especially out of the young actors.

The opening medium shot of the couple in the process of getting married is telling – no traces of blissfulness and expectation of a sweet and better life can be found on their faces. The loud annoyance of a baby crying off-screen, presumably from the audience at the wedding, further portends some difficulties in this romance. The visual juxtaposition between the redness of the curtains that fill the entire screen, the color that traditional Chinese-culture associates with happiness and prosperity, and the massive neon sign of the character “happiness” being raised up slowly against the curtain but in a tilted position, foreshadows the encroachment of technology on traditions. The immediately following sequence is pregnant with drama. Yun-Yun, the ex-girlfriend of the groom, bursts into the preparation of the wedding and howls “where is the pregnant bitch?” She also goes to Po-Po and wails about how she should be the one to call her “mother” (an important traditional practice on the wedding day that symbolizes that the bride is accepted into the groom's family) and therefore has let her down. Anderson's observation of grandma's “silent but very, very pointed”<sup>52</sup> disapproval of the bride is accurate, but his induction of grandma's preference of Yun-Yun is hasty. The subtle action of Po-Po immediately trying to stand up and desiring to leave upon being grabbed by Yun-Yun and her indictment of the whole situation shows that she sees

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<sup>51</sup> Anderson, J., 85.

<sup>52</sup> Anderson, 86.

through her character and her schemes. The collapse of the moral system manifest in the current generation causes her confusion and discomfort. The next shot of the blow-up wedding picture canvas which is placed on the stand by NJ, along with the previous sequence of the wedding segments, creates a powerful montage of collision. The wedding picture that takes up two-thirds of the screen is seen as upside down to us, the audience, but not to the characters' awareness. This upside-down-ness is shown in the disappearance of traditional family values, idea of marriage, appropriate social conduct, prevalence of materialism, lack of decency and dignity, and most importantly, a loss of a sense of self in the current age. Next to the picture frame, Ting-Ting informs NJ that Po-Po has told her that she wants to go home, when the wedding is clearly not over yet.

The following shot in the car is worth noting here. Throughout the film, there are many instances of car scenes, and the composition of each scene is carefully arranged to reflect the relationship between the people in the car. NJ and Ting-Ting, NJ and Yang-Yang, NJ and Ota are all shown in frontal frames behind the windshield, occupying each side of the screen. In contrast, NJ and A-Di, who represent the two ends on the spectrum of responsibility, stability, principles, maturity and materialism, were shot occupying the same frame but from the back of the car. Similarly, when NJ is with Da-Da, the friend and co-worker who desires maximum profits with minimal cost, he is always framed separately from Da-Da the driver. The cinematic correlatives show that "neither (A-Di and Da-Da) seems NJ's true fellow traveler nor shares with him his ideal universe."<sup>53</sup> Now we can go back to this shot of grandma sitting in the backseat, which is one of the only shots taken from inside the car. She is positioned to be alone, without a companion, without the reflection of the city

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<sup>53</sup> Li, 203.

bustle dissolving into her through car windows. The skyscrapers and broad streets filled with traffic literally pass behind her. This medium shot of Grandma's anxious uneasiness as she sits deeply in thought is striking, and it pushes for the spectator's anticipation of what will happen to this growing obsolescence and irrelevance of the traditional worldview. The differences in framing of people in the car, the direction of the shot, the juxtaposition of the city reflection on the windshield or the lack thereof, the positions of the characters, are fecund with meanings and immanent depth that invites further prodding.

### **Language 1: Glass Reflection**

Li elegantly recounts in his article on *Yi Yi* using the framework of 'reflexive modernity'. He contrasts this conceptual framework against the inevitability of a post-modern amorality, epistemic atheism or the demise of artistic agency,

Yang figures this world of layered complexity and blurring boundaries with his ingenious use of abundant glass in metropolitan architecture, which, whether in Tokyo or in Taipei, is the transnational space his characters traverse...glass panes mark space without total delimitation, suggesting permeability, liquidity and flexibility, typical of the age of transnational capitalism or reflexive modernity (Li, 200).

In this 'reflexive modernity', Li contends that truth claims are still possible, unlike postmodern dystopic resignation. It provides a moment of reflection, reorganization, self-regulation – a self-organization of life stories. Li's attempt to understand *Yi Yi* apropos of this framework is especially germane to my emphasis on Yang's film language. Parallel to his belief that the "fundamentally new experience of time and space...in turn demands an appropriate ethical imperative" (Li, 198), I maintain that it also requires an appropriate aesthetic and epistemic imperative. The operation of foregrounding the medium of glass

window panes in an image that literally connects and divides the human and the city is one of Yang's gestures towards a new reflective aesthetic. The sequences with Min-Min, who plays the roles of wife, mother and daughter at once, possessing some of the most poignant and painstakingly framed visual compositions of solitude in the lonely crowd, will be examined now.

Po-Po is found to have had a stroke next to the dumpster downstairs and is rushed to the hospital when most of the family are still at the wedding. Afterwards, the comatose Po-Po is transferred back home, and her bedside effectively becomes a psychoanalytic office. On the doctor's recommendation, each one takes his turn to go talk to her. They all start to realize how difficult it is to talk to an unresponsive existence, which can also be understood as talking to themselves, and they quickly run out of things to say. Min-Min's fragility starts to manifest in her prolonged frustration with Yang-Yang, who sits in her lap and refuses to talk to Po-Po because he thinks she cannot hear him. We are led to witness the gravity of her psychological discomfort in the bedroom, when NJ goes back home after spending an extraordinary musical night with Ota, the potential business partner from Japan.

The static camera freezes on the bedroom door, and we hear the sound of the door to the living room getting unlocked, opened and closed. We can imagine that NJ is entering the apartment. Shoes are changed, and keys are dropped. Lights are turned on, and after almost 30 seconds of no visual action, NJ walks into the frame. Min-Min has been weeping. Realizing that there is so little meaningful and substantial experience in her life, she is filled with desperation and sadness. "Every day the things I told mother are just the same...How do I have so little? Every day I am like a fool...What am I doing every day?" The visual of this shot is rich with implications. Min-Min is sitting to the camera right with her back to the

make-up desk. The mirror standing upright on the desk shows the back of Min-Min's head. Right next to the mirror image is Yang-Yang's picture. This shot reminds the spectator of the 8-year-old son's philosophy behind practicing photography. According to him, people cannot see the back of their head, which means that they can only see half of the truth, so he takes pictures of people's back so as to help them see better. Juxtaposing the back of Min-Min's back of the head with her frontal image, Yang creates two layers of metaphorical significance here. With both the face and the back present in the same frame, we can understand that this is the first step of Min-Min reaching towards a better and more comprehensive self-knowledge. As illustrated in Chapter I with Plato's allegory, the realization that we have been living an "illusion" is an extremely painful process – thus Min-Min's fear and misery. The second layer is a significant parallel between the artist-and-philosopher boy Yang-Yang and the director of *Yi Yi*, Edward Yang. The latter, like the former, is trying to 'help' people to see better, to contemplate on a more complete picture. His effort is promptly realized in the next couple of shots showing the exterior city-night traffic through the bedroom window, with the bedroom lamp light coinciding with streetlights outside on the same plane, and then followed immediately by a shot of the interior of the bedroom from the outside, with the city lights dissolving inside the bedroom, engulfing the couple. Because of the intertwined connectivity between the city, the others and the individual, the self has been so intensified that an unavoidable consequence of the internalization of the external is visually depicted here. NJ closes the blinds, perhaps striving to thwart the invasion of the outside.

A sequence later, a one-minute long take of Min-Min standing in front of the office building window echoes the same visual logic, with more intensification. The image is crowded: the monotonous office lights, desks, walls occupy almost two-thirds of the screen



and the city lights from highways, traffic, skyscrapers, office buildings are projected onto the same plane, overlapping and competing with the office terrain for space in the frame. A medium shot of Min-Min standing motionless and blankly staring at the city positions her at the intersectional narrow space between the outside city and the interior workplace, the intricate fluidity between them and her no longer provides a sturdy grounding for existence. The red blinking stop light is reflected at the exact point where her heart should be.<sup>54</sup> She feels lost, having “nowhere to go”, as the total interpenetration between the society and the individual, visually portrayed here, seems to imply. The transparency and reflexivity of the ubiquitous glass windows have become the quintessential constituent in Yang’s film language, which molds the symptomatic sense of our loss of self and of our positions in the world into a visual dissolution of the boundaries that used to be meaningful. It compels an anguish of witnessing the unintentional and undesired self-dissolution and self-endangerment in the characters and in ourselves.

Min-Min leaves her lovely children, the comatose elderly mother, and kind husband for a retreat up in the mountains in a Buddhist monastery. But she will come back, and her reflections and self-knowledge will be examined later. Going back to analyzing the component of glass as part of Yang’s compelling film language, another sequence will serve to be useful in illuminating the point.

Yang’s fascination with glass as a site of reflection and distortion is effective in that it also adds another layer to Deleuze’s time-image. Yang masterfully employs glass windows to distinguish his characters’ emotions in his mise-en-scène and cinematography.<sup>55</sup> This is

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<sup>54</sup> Li, 201. A brilliant observation of this detail in a breathtaking image.

<sup>55</sup> The same can be said about directors like Wayne Wang in his *Chan is Missing* (1982) and Abbas Kiarostami in his *Like Someone in Love* (2012).

acutely evident in the sequence of encounters when the father goes to Tokyo on a business trip while meeting his ex-girlfriend. This would be the time to capture past sweetness and rekindle previous romance, to relive youth and even re-make a decision that could change their life. In a 30-second long take of the couple riding the subway, we see them through the glass window of the subway, the man sitting near the window dozing off and the woman deep in contemplation. Nothing substantial happens throughout this shot. We see only them and the ever-passing reflections of the city lights on them. The juxtaposition between the fast passing city lights and the woman in thought highlights her solitude and emotional struggles. This sadness and helplessness is intensified two shots later, in a long but mobile take in the hallway of the hotel— our vision is suddenly channeled into her room, but the camera is not. We see her through a giant glass window, where the physical room can barely be distinguished, and all we are perceiving is her silhouette slowly moving in the landscape of the city – cell tower, skyscraper of office spaces, lights from other inhabitants' rooms, etc. We almost have a montage within a shot, the conflict between the elements comes alive and creates an organic encompassing concept. In this 45-second long take, we watch an individual dissolving into a massive city, alone with millions of other souls, dark in the bright city lights. Nothing happens except for her quiet sobbing. The glass adds a layer of distance, literally and metaphorically, delineating the exact objects but in a darker and more blurry resolution. Furthermore, it projects two things from opposite sides onto the same plane at the same time. This is an image that unfolds time and also forces the spectator to confront our modern condition – the growing lack of boundary between the individual and the societal, the irrationalities in our desires and ambiguities in our values and responsibilities, and a sense of alienation and fragmentation that make us feel a lack of power in the face of time and

inscrutable events in life. The glass and its reflections seem magical, but also serve as a constant reminder of the medium that we are looking at. Film seems to be a transparent reflection of the world, but it is always distorted or polished, edited or manipulated. It is through the active contemplation of the relationship between the images and the elements within the images that truth emerges.

## **Language 2: Parallel Editing**

Often used as a “textbook” example of cross-cutting, or parallel editing, the alternating between the simultaneous sequences lived by NJ and Ting-Ting in two distinct locations is simply fascinating.<sup>56</sup> In this segment, we are presented with father and daughter, respectively seeking the sweetness of a youthful romance in Taipei and Tokyo under the same night sky. Cities are constantly being altered by new modes of transportation, communication, entertainment, newer and taller buildings, etc. but Yang’s literal uniting of the two city spaces certainly attempts to reveal that despite all the generational and cultural differences, there are experiences and reflections that unify and bond us all. His ingenious sewing together of the two spaces therefore requires some focused attention and unpacking here.

NJ goes to Tokyo for a business trip to meet with Ota, with the intention of collaborating with him. His colleagues have found a sponsor who is supposed to be enthusiastic about Ota’s works. At the subway station in Tokyo, a high-angle long shot positions NJ and Sherry in the center, with their backs to us. They hold up a map of the station and debate about where the exit is. The station is so crowded with passengers and

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<sup>56</sup> An example can be found at <http://filmanalysis.yctl.org/> under “Editing.”

visitors that they are barely distinguishable from others. Their conversation gets carried over into the next shot and is engulfed by the noise of the train coming into the frame and then leaving the frame completely. In this thirty-second long take, we have two trains passing in front of our eyes, while the dialogue from the previous interior scene continues.

“This reminds me of our first date. I was so nervous that I had hiccups, remember? I’ve had hiccups since when I was a kid whenever I’m nervous.”  
“I was too nervous to ask why...”  
“You were too nervous to breathe!”  
“I sweat when I’m nervous, my palms, even my feet!”

While in Taipei, we are shown a medium shot of the narrow hallway right outside the family’s apartment. As the English teacher leaves the neighbor’s apartment, the elevator stops on this floor. Ting-Ting walks briskly past him and they nearly bump into each other. She does not stop, clearly preoccupied, as the next shot in the bedroom shows: she tries different clothes on and rushes to her first date with Fatty. The English teacher mumbles grudgingly, “sorry, excuse me” as he walks into the elevator, which nearly closes before he can enter.

Ting-Ting jumps onto the back of the boy’s bike and they ride off into the grey dusk in Taipei. The scene cuts back to the train station in Tokyo, and Sherry is talking about her childlessness with her current husband. Again, although the conversation is taking place between them, they are shot from a different platform and their wardrobe (predominantly white, black, khaki) hardly distinguishes them from the surrounding passengers waiting for the train. NJ starts to talk about his children, “I love my daughter. She is starting to grow into a woman. I get jealous...knowing eventually she’ll be with someone else.” The last part of the sentence gets carried over into the next frame, which positions Ting-Ting, the subject of the discussion, in a high-angle shot, in front of a movie poster, waiting for Fatty. The

overlooking shot corresponds to NJ's perspective – a naturally protective and to a certain extent possessive one. As Fatty enters the frame, the camera pans, following their walking movement. Ting-Ting asks Fatty, "What time is it?" to which he answers, "It's 9 o'clock." The voice of Sherry fades in, "It's almost 10...that's 8 a.m. in Chicago and 9 p.m. in Taipei." Only after the end of that sentence does the camera cut back to a very long and static shot of NJ and Sherry, who are crossing a quiet street right outside a train station. "Look, this is like the crossing near our school." "That's gone now...The first time I held your hand, we were at a railroad crossing, going to the movies." The camera now cuts back to Ting-Ting and Fatty at a zebra crossing. We hear NJ continuing with his reminiscence: "I reached for you, ashamed of my sweaty palm..." corresponding to this voice bridge we see Fatty timidly reaching for Ting-Ting's hand. Cutting back to Tokyo, NJ and Sherry are at a crossing, too. A train passes right in front of the camera, blocking the view for several seconds. NJ continues: "Now, I'm holding your hands again. Only it's a different place..." Visually the scene cuts back to Ting-Ting and Fatty but NJ's voice goes on: "a different time...a different age..." Sherry looks at him and smiles: "But the same sweaty palm."

The seemingly indomitable and insufferable solitude that is conveyed in Min-Min's segment, as analyzed above, is countered here with a suggestion, a reminder, and a way of thinking. This brilliant assemblage of events that happen simultaneously at two different time zones and between two different generations expresses the generational continuity and similarity despite the apparent changes and developments in our modern society. From Sophocles' *Oedipus* to DeLillo's Jeff Lockhart, the desire to understand while struggling with the previous or the next generation is perennial.<sup>57</sup> We tend to feel this unbridgeable gap

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<sup>57</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*. DeLillo, *Zero K* (2016).

between two generations in their diverging world views, distinct experiences of growth, diverse cultural and political movement, and the succession of the technological devices that dominate each. This loneliness is dispersed to every corner of modern society – the knowledge of a great number of people living in various remote places, that each part of the world is of a different time, the feeling one could not possibly connect with others, existing in a different time and place is potentially crushing. In the lonely crowd, where everyone is sure of his/her own misery and obstacles, but not sure of others' empathy and commiseration, one takes comfort in isolated solitariness. By weaving together the simultaneous events from different locations, we are urged to witness the flow itself that connects different generations. Growing up, exploring that tingling warmth that resembles love or fondness, searching for shared feelings and relationships, affirming, doubting and re-affirming one's self-worth and value – all these life experiences never cease to puzzle us. As Li argues, "the contemporary dispersion of subjectivity in the multiple spheres of work and leisure should not distract us either from an awareness of our origins or an anticipation of our demise."<sup>58</sup> Life and death unite us all in our search for love and validation. Yang uses parallel editing to construct a continuous time-space that attempts to restore the totality and universality that is much fractured and disintegrated in a post-modern world.

The whole sequence ends with a long take of a discussion between Ting-Ting and Fatty about the relationship between film and life. The camera is situated outside the store, and as usual, shows the young couple getting some beverages at 'N.Y. Bagels' through the store's glass window. The camera pans slightly to keep the characters in frame as they walk

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<sup>58</sup> Li, 202.

from the register to find a table to sit down. Fatty asks Ting-Ting whether she liked the movie they just saw, and she commented that “it was a bit too serious.”

“So you like comedy more than tragedy?”

“No, it’s not like that. I just don’t like when people deliberately tell the story in such a sad way.”

“But in reality, life has both sad and happy things...so this way, movies are realistic and lifelike, that’s why we like them.”

“If movies are just like life, then who needs to go see them? Just live your life!”

To this Fatty does not reply directly – he quotes his uncle, who says that “after the invention of movies, our life has been extended at least three times as long as before.” Ting-Ting is flabbergasted and unconvinced by this statement. Fatty expands, “it means movies give us twice as much experience what we get from daily life.” And only later on do we realize that this moment here, when he uses the example of murder to elaborate his point, is a foreshadowing of what comes towards the end of the film – the self-induced tragedy of murder. Fatty thinks that although we have never murdered anyone, we all know what it is like and how it is done. According to him, we have already had many attempts and experiences with murder, presumably from watching it. To which Ting-Ting gives a scoff, “but how’s that good to me? I am not going to murder anyone! If life’s so tragic and horrible, why should we live at all?”

Many have pointed out that Yang-Yang, the 8-year-old photographer and philosopher is the alter-ego of the director Edward Yang.<sup>59</sup> However, the boy is not the only philosopher at home. Ting-Ting, a budding philosopher, full of practical wisdom, sensitivity, resilience and malleability, is the only one in the family who talks to Po-Po more than once when the latter falls into a coma. She is the one person that is always with Po-Po at the wedding taking care of her. Through Ting-Ting, Po-Po communicates to the rest of the family that she is not feeling well and wants to go home. Ting-Ting is the character who had a spiritual communion with Po-Po before her death. On the surface, Po-Po might be, as Li writes, “Yang’s object-correlative for the newly built-in obsolescence of the old filial authority while the breakdown of generational interlocution is his overall figure of familial disintegration (Li, 199).” Yet there is much impalpable evidence that the tradition and ethics that Po-Po stands for, the embodiment of the natural wave of growing old, falling sick and passing away remain puissant in guiding and influencing the younger Ting-Ting.

The alignment of Ting-Ting with NJ becomes evident when, in contrast to all other family member, the camera is positioned on their left when they are talking to Po-Po. At the funeral, Ting-Ting and NJ are also sitting together when Yang-Yang is reading from his notes to Po-Po. What they both embody is a natural dignity and human decency, values that they naturally uphold, as well as an instinctive inclination to protect others’ feelings. However, perhaps because of her youth and purity of heart, Ting-Ting does not share the jadedness of NJ. The growth of Ting-Ting is symbolized by the flower plant that she has been taking care of as part of an assignment for her biology class. In her speech to Po-Po, she

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<sup>59</sup> Anderson, J, 88. “Yang-Yang – can his name designate him as anything other than a stand-in for the director?” And also see Li, 201, where he compares Yang-Yang and Edward Yang in both of their concerns about vision and cognition.



confesses that she cannot sleep because of the guilt she feels that she might be the cause for Po-Po's falling into a coma since she left a bag of trash that she was supposed to take out on the balcony. Po-Po who took the trash out is later found to have collapsed next to the dumpster outside. While Ting-Ting dozes off in class, we hear the teacher's voice making fun of her while the camera is fixated on her. "I guess she must have stayed up all night to take care of her plant!" Right before this, the teacher is expanding on the idea that over-nurturing may not improve growth and might even diminish the evolutionary impulse and drive to reproduce. This technique of hearing a diegetic character's voice without seeing the body deepens the space of diegesis, and renders it no longer limited to the visual space on the screen. Compared to other students' plants, which all exhibit the freshness and radiance of colorful flowers, Ting-Ting's barren leaves seem grey without highlights. Has the plant been over-nurtured? Is Ting-Ting over-protected by her family?

Her main growth and understanding of the world develop during the time when her parents are not at home. When she comes back from the police office, confused about Fatty's crime and the world, she has a soothing and miraculous moment with Po-Po. The camera tilts from Po-Po, gently stroking her granddaughter's hair, to Ting-Ting, falling asleep on grandma's lap. "I haven't slept for so long. Now you've forgiven me, I can finally sleep. Po-Po, why is the world so different from what we thought it was?" Now the screen cuts to a rare close-up of the blooming bud of the flower plant that we see in the biology class. The blossoming can only occur after reaching a Socratic aporia – the realization that the world is not as we thought it was, which is a necessary step towards philosophizing and enlightenment. Like Socrates' interlocutors, who were forced to examine their own points of view in dialectic at the Athenian agora, Ting-Ting is thrown into a series of uncontrollable

events – Po-Po’s falling sick, a friend’s coldness, Fatty’s unpredictable flings and ineffable killing – upon which she has to re-evaluate the simplicity and ignorant bliss she thought the world embodies. We, too, are confronted with the story told in Yang’s meticulous film language.

The sequence of parallel editing ends in the contrast between Ting-Ting and Fatty through their conversation behind the glass window. After some meandering comments on Ting-Ting in general, now is the time to go back to their conversation as they exemplify different spectatorial positions while viewing films. Ting-Ting is able to look at a film critically from a distance and believes that the experiences represented cannot replace authentic lived experience. On the other hand, Fatty completely absorbs whatever happens on the screen into his own life. Baudry refers to this type of viewing as “representation taken as perception” (Baudry 182) and the literal distance that Yang adds by positioning the characters behind the bagel store’s glass wall gently creates “distant observers”, who are not easily seduced into illusion created by the diegetic space.<sup>60</sup> This distancing effect is further exemplified by Yang’s use of sound and long shot, which we will examine in the next section.

### **Language 3: Vision, Sound and Cognition**

This section will look at two aspects of Yang’s film language in terms of the spectatorial effects they provoke. Visually, his masterful long shots are nondramatic yet

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<sup>60</sup> For a full explication on the term, please see Burch’s contribution to Japanese cinema in 1930s to 40s. For him, Japanese cinematic practice from that period of time differs significantly from Western Hollywood filmmaking, notably for its continuity editing. It achieves this by the influence of *benshi*, storytellers standing next to the screen, and a more general decentering of the narrative and the visual, which can be seen most evidently in the cinematography of Ozu, Mizoguchi, Ishida Tamizo, etc.

extremely poetic. From an acoustic perspective, his weaving together of sound and music is as meticulously done as his parallel editing: the spatio-temporal experiences that the film presents necessarily invite examination, questioning, reflection, and contemplation.

Yang's treatment of sound in *Yi Yi* is somewhat peculiar, and this section will examine two manifestations of this idiosyncrasy – his use of voice-off and anti-naturalistic sound representation, e.g. the volume of the conversation does not diminish as the characters walk away from the camera. Regarding the power of the voice-off,<sup>61</sup> Doane offers astute insights that are pertinent to the discussion here.

“For the phenomenon of the voice-off cannot be understood outside a consideration of the relationships established between the diegesis, the visible space of the screen, *and* the acoustical space of the theater...the voice-off deepens the diegesis, gives it an extent which exceeds that of the image, and thus supports the claim that there is a space in the fictional world which the camera does not register. In its own way, it *accounts for* lost space” (Doane, 340).

According to Doane, the diegesis is not limited to the visual dimension of the film, and the use of the voice-off accounts for that limit. This concept provides a sturdy bridge to the theoretical framework that is expounded in Chapter I on the relationship between vision and cognition. Building on this idea, the voice-off serves as a reminder that what we see is not all that there is. With the help of sound, we get a more holistic understanding of the

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<sup>61</sup> It might be helpful to recapitulate the differences between voice-off and voice-over before we analyze specific scenes. Voice-over is commonly used as commentary in documentaries, or interior monologues. It represents a disembodied voice, which exudes a radical otherness and unquestioned power. However, voice-off refers to a voice that comes from off the screen, instances in which we hear the voice of a diegetic character who is not visible within the frame.

diegetic world – the position of its characters relative to each other in the physical surroundings. In this way, how they affect and perceive each other becomes more evident.

The use of voice-off is briefly mentioned in the last section when Ting-Ting is scoffed at by her teacher for dozing off in class due to her sleepless night with too much sense of guilt. Parallel to this scenario we see how Yang-Yang, falsely accused by the teacher of bringing a condom to school, is made to stand up and defend himself in front of all others in class. In each scene, our young protagonist is positioned towards the center (Ting-Ting, center right; Yang-Yang, center left) among all other students. A relatively shallow depth-of-field guides our attention to the main characters, but also provides the general reaction of the fellow students in the scenario to the teacher's absolute hierarchical dominance over others. Instead of a conventional shot/reverse shot that gives anyone with lines equal dramatic value, Yang hesitates to cut to a different take or camera that films the other party. The camera has minimal movement, maintaining its gaze on the young children. We hear the teachers' reproach, relentless or humorous, and their effect on the students is aggravated by the unfaltering attention of the camera. The relationship between students and teachers is thus much intensified and forces us to contemplate the teachers' direct influence on students.

Another instance of the intensification effect is present in the office after the presentation. We see a long shot of Ota standing aloof, but with the birds, and we hear the voice-off of the other colleagues' trite comments. The juxtaposition intensifies the uniqueness and solitude of Ota, which NJ alone values and treasures.

Furthermore, Yang pushes the intensified effect of voice-over by creating an ambiguity between diegetic sound and non-diegetic sound, through using sound bridges to connect different scenes. In the scene where Ting-Ting plays the piano, the source of the Jazz

piano music is not revealed until the end. Before we see Ting-Ting playing the piano in real time, we have an interior medium shot of the pregnant newly-wed bride looking through CDs, another medium shot of Yang-Yang sitting at the table doing homework, with Ting-Ting's back barely visible on the left edge of the frame in the dark. Before this sequence, when the same piano music is inserted, we have a high-angle voyeuristic long shot from the balcony of the neighbor girl fighting with Fatty in a corner of the street, clearly from an earlier time.<sup>62</sup> The piano music from a later time, together with the background noise of the street traffic and the barely audible fight conversation, mostly consisting of the girl asking Fatty to leave while punching his chest, constitute an impossible time-space by recuperating a lost totality in a much fractured modern society. Before seeing Ting-Ting at the piano, it is natural to assume that the music is non-diegetic and inserted to create a sensation, but realizing at the end that it is diegetic music, we confront a realization of the impossibility of this – it cannot exist diegetically in the previous long shot of the couple fighting. The two separate scenes are united by the same piece of music not in the conventional practice of a background music, but by a continuous consciousness, exemplified by Ting-Ting's piano music. The inter-relatedness of all the characters shown in the sequence is embedded in the ambiguity between diegetic and non-diegetic music.

Another striking instance that plays on the sound bridge is the juxtaposition of the ultrasonic exam image of the fetus and the business presentation speech selling the new technology in video games. Looking at the monitor of the ultrasound, we hear the sound of heartbeat and then the voice of an accented female speaker commences: "It begins to acquire

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<sup>62</sup> Compare the shot of NJ and A-Di chatting on the balcony and the shot of the fighting scene. The latter is clearly in a much brighter setting (still daylight) than the former, which is somewhat late at night (almost completely dark).

general signs of life...it begins to think, calculate, and then matures into a living entity and becomes the most devoted companion to our emotions...that's the unbounded future for computer games." The screen is now entirely occupied by the ultrasonic image of the fetus. The shock that this juxtaposition creates is towering. Until the last sentence, we probably thought it could be a voice-over of a documentary explaining the development of life, or a diegetic commentary from the nurse in the room. The realization that this speech is from a simultaneous meeting advocating for a literal replacement of human beings, collocated with the image of a growing life naturally leads to some reflection about the nature of life and the essence of human existence in the modern world. The ubiquitous presence of technological devices, the intrusion of digital screens into every corner of the society is also portrayed by Yang's use of actual screens – many shots were mediated through surveillance camera monitors at the apartment and school. One of the prominent examples is when Yang-Yang sneaks out during nap-time at school to get a film strip for his photographic project, his return to school's classroom is entirely depicted through movement on four different monitor screens. Whose point-of-view is this? We will never know. Living in an over-populated urban space, we are perhaps watched by others all the time without realizing it, and the theme of a lost sense of being grounded in our environment will be dealt with in much more detail in the next Chapter, which analyzes *Terrorizers*. The omnipresence of images and screens, however, is different in effect from Yang-Yang's practice, which serves to provide a holistic view of the self and the world. As Li eloquently puts it: "For Yang finally, self-reflexivity will have to involve self-reflection, not reflection as the bouncing back and forth of images or the superficial suturing of subjectivity but as the possession of knowledge and the apprehension of totality" (201). The vision that leads to cognition is not simply constituted

by mere images, but images thoughtfully constructed that make people reflect on the totality that binds us to the world. Yang's film practice actively recuperates the possibility of constructing totality again, which is much fractured in the post-modern world.

In addition to using voice-off and foreshadowing the next scene with a sound bridge, Yang employs a third practice to experiment with space and time, sound and image, voice and body. Conventionally, and naturally, when the characters are shown walking significantly away from the camera, their conversation should be less audible. However, with his preference of long shots and long takes, even when the characters are clearly out of hearing range, he does not alter the volume of the conversation. The scene at the beautiful and serene Japanese temple perhaps best exemplifies this practice. Throughout the whole sequence, the camera is relatively far from the characters, who are finally settling the mystery of their separation after so many years. It might be helpful to break down this practice into two parts – the preference of long shot over close-ups and keeping the volume steady even as the characters move out of vision.

Close-ups are commonly used to enhance the dramatic effect of human faces and expressions of emotions (see chapter I). There are very few close-ups throughout *Yi Yi*, even when we expect to see one. The wedding banquet slowly drags into a farce at the end, the result of a common practice which makes the groom drink so much as to prank or humiliate him, albeit with a friendly spirit. We are so conditioned to expect to see intensive action taking place on a screen – the facial expression of the groom gulping down jugs of beer and alcohol, others' jeering and entertained smiles, the groom's retching afterwards, etc. But all we are given is an extremely long and wide shot of the crowd, an amazing mise-en-scène depicting a mixture of pink heart-shaped balloons and traditional Chinese decorations, a

movement in collectivity, and an unnameable loneliness in not being closer to the group, to where the action happens, to each other.

On top of this, the conscious choice of Yang situating us not physically close to the subjects but audibly close creates another layer of complication in the film viewing experience. The unnaturalness helps to provoke a reflection about the apparatus, such as the cavalier mics that the characters are using, so that we can hear them clearly even at such a distance. We are made the quiet observers, and the power endowed in us is immense – we can hear so much and so clearly, yet we feel so helpless in the face of this unbridgeable distance between us and them, between the present and our memories, between the reality and the fictional, between our desires and others' expectations of us. We are made to be stuck in this limbo, like NJ, who is given the miraculous opportunity to relive his past differently but realizes the inefficacy of the choice as everything turns out about the same. Are we doomed to a pessimistic fatalism that imprisons us in the fragmented condition shaped by modernity and globalism?

The pensive uses of glass, parallel editing and sound, are the techniques that Yang uses to suggest an alternative to this pessimism. He suggests that we could and should be like Yang-Yang, with a Nietzschean passion and courage to go beyond what we normally see and believe, with an incessant curiosity to look, to examine and to reflect on life, love and death, the essential concepts that unite all human experience. Bordwell, at the end of his essay on the poetics of Chinese Cinema, summarizes well the spirit behind my attempt at reading Yang in addressing a universal condition:

the Taiwanese filmmakers, starting from a similar point of departure – the fixed long take – discovered common features of the medium: the trapezoidal playing space and



the opportunities provided by blockage and revelation. They hit on, we might say, similar solutions to a common problem: how to direct attention within the distant, static shot?...Not everything of interest about a culture's film is culturally specific, or even specifically cultural! Put less paradoxically, if we attend to the way films are made, we may be led to study transcultural processes, the sharing of craft decisions and stylistic norms, either by influence or through a common point of departure shaped by craft traditions or the particularities of the medium. (Bordwell, 160-161)

The formal elements of the film, upon close reading, are shown to have the effect of rejecting the transparency of the signifier. The divergence it represents from conventional Hollywood filmmaking and editing is effective in making the spectator think about the image, the sound and the equipment that it uses in rendering the entire diegetic world. Yang's last feature produces a unique but not parochial aesthetics that encompasses meaning and invites reflection. Yet, as one of the most important and talented filmmakers in the Taiwanese New Cinema, his consciousness of the power of film language is not only limited to his later works.

### Chapter III:

#### *The Terrorizers (1986)*

Going back to this film made 14 years before *Yi Yi*, we can trace some stylistic changes in Yang's practice. However, what remains is a sensitivity to colors, an ingenious portrayal of loneliness and an intense consciousness of meaning conveyed by film language. Anderson characterizes this film as "Yang's most difficult, intellectually provocative, and structurally challenging film," and he is well justified in doing so.<sup>63</sup> It is difficult to pinpoint what exactly this film is about or even what happens in the film, as one of the main themes explored is the boundary between fiction and reality.

This third feature of Yang's unfolds the intertwining of life and death between three different couples: a young, literary and artistic pair, a middle-class and middle-aged married couple, and a gangster couple who get income from committing petty pocket picking and blackmailing. The main storyline revolves around the older couple – the wife is a novelist who suffers from writer's block, an unhappy marriage, and eventually gets inspiration from a prank call from the short-haired White Chick<sup>64</sup> and finishes her story. The story wins her a prestigious award, during the writing of which she leaves her husband, a doctor desperate for promotion to a higher bureaucratic level at the hospital, for her old lover. Love and death insidiously loom in most parts of the film. Two minutes into the film, we are shown a long

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<sup>63</sup> Anderson, 45.

<sup>64</sup> One of the few instances throughout the film that gives any indication on this short-haired girl's identity is when Li Li-Chung shows his cop friend a picture of White Chick and her fugitive boyfriend, the cop refers to her as "that wai guo niu" (literally means the foreign chick), and as "that xiao za zhong" (literally means the bastard, or mixed-raced person), corresponding to a previous scene when her mother is beating her with rolled-up newspapers and scolds in Taiwanese: "if you are so tough, just stay out like your dad, don't come back, don't ever come back!" which implies her dad has left the mother and the daughter, presumably a white man.

and high-angled shot of a dead corpse on the ground (Death #1), presumably the consequence of the gun shot we hear in the beginning. The young photographer gets intrigued, takes his camera (one of many) and goes to the crime scene looking for titillating images, captures pictures of White Chick who flees from the crime scene and eventually takes her to the hospital, the fact of which we only come to understand towards the end of the film. His girlfriend finds out about all the film prints and printed-out photos of White Chick, gets dismayed and depressed, which leads to an attempted suicide (Death #2). The husband, Li Li-Chung finds out, along with his colleagues that their direct boss, a high-ranking administrator in the hospital, has passed away (Death #3). This premature death opens up the opportunity for Li to be promoted and acquire that position. White Chick uses prostitution as a front, steals from the customer's wallet and pockets when he is in shower, except that this time, her practice is busted by the man and she sprints over and kills the man by stabbing him with a knife (Death #4). Diegetically, we then learn that in the narrative world of the award-winning novel written by the wife, Chou Yu-Fen, the fictional husband kills the wife and himself (Death #5). Towards the end of the film, an entire spree of killing occurs in both Li's fantasy and reality (Death #6). The film culminates in this mystifying ending, making "a virtuosically bold, modernist statement about the amorphous nature of fact and fiction", the shock and ingeniousness of which will be discussed in the next section.<sup>65</sup>

This intricate relationship between love and death, the perennial question that has been explored by thinkers throughout history of human civilization – Plato, Kierkegaard, Wagner, Tolstoy, etc. – is also depicted here, in Yang's third feature, as a question that needs to be confronted by all humanity. Thus, in contrast to the approaches that have been taken up

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<sup>65</sup> Anderson, 46.

by various scholars in unveiling the essence of the film, Wilson, Chang, Liu, Jameson, just to name a few, I will argue that Yang, through his meticulously chosen film language, conveys that what underlies the desperation, helplessness and misery is a fundamental lack of self-knowledge and inner reflexivity, which is also made evident in his last feature, *Yi Yi*. In the first section of this chapter, in addition to analyzing the mise-en-scène of the film, I will focus on a particular film language that is omitted in Yang's later work but assumes a significant function in the *Terrorizers* – Close-Up. Section 2 will engage in a dialogue with Jameson's post-modern analysis of the film, especially his understanding of the film's ending, namely its narrative structure, function and significance. It is in this section that I will summarize his arguments, build on some of his brilliant observations, but ultimately propose an alternative reading of the film through an original exploration of an important insert in the opening sequence, never analyzed in any academic writing on the *Terrorizers* published thus far. I will point out the striking resemblance between this shot and a famous painting of Van Gogh's and discuss how it serves as an examination of the relationship between art, life and truth in the framework of Western philosophy.

### **Section 1: Close-ups and Mise-en-Scène**

Contrary to *Yi Yi*, in which close-ups are rarely employed in the visual story-telling, *Terrorizers* assigns a prominent role to close-ups. In the opening sequence, after a long static shot of a street scene in Taipei in the dusk, in which a police car rushes by with its siren on, the screen dips into black and we see the title of the film. The next shot is an extreme close-up of a female face, eyes and nose only, presumably from a grainy, black-and-white poster of a Western painting. The following shot, still a close-up, positions a different part of the same

poster, and it reveals the speaking mouth of the previous face, and a man's profile next to it. This attention to human face, as discussed in Chapter I is extremely compelling in its spectatorial effects as it creates a penetrating and new dimension of the soul – the world of micro-physiognomy. According to Balasz, the close-ups or extreme close-ups, as part of the cinematography of a film, render it possible for the spectators to move in the spiritual dimension of facial expression. Furthermore, Yang's composition of *mise-en-scène* is also rich in its implications – his concern with visual power is especially reflected in the choice of wardrobe, color of the props and the background of various scenes. These elements will also undergo scrutiny when pertinent scenes are analyzed.

Throughout the film, each female character is given her unique frame of close-up to facilitate the storytelling. The close-up images of both White Chick and Yu-Fen the novelist are centered on their faces but presented through different media. The audience remembers White Chick's face through the photographer's assorted pictures, especially the enlarged, mosaic one hanging on the wall. In contrast, Yu-Fen is shown through extreme close-ups of her face during a post-award interview followed by a wide shot of twelve different TV screens. Both scenes deserve to be examined closely to unveil Yang's hyper-consciousness in composing his film language.

After stabbing a man in the stomach in the hotel room, White Chick roams in the city for a night and a day. After a close-up of her hands cleaning the blood off of the murder-weapon, we see: a medium shot of her feet and lower legs, a parallel image to the one in the beginning of the film right before her collapse in the street; a medium shot of her standing in the rain in a hat and sunglasses, as cars go by in front of and behind her; a long shot of her walking up the stairs of a skywalk, and then presumably a PoV of the rustling tree leaves in

the wind; another medium shot of her sitting in the last row of an empty bus at night, coughing; and finally an eleven-second Deleuzian “time-image” of the empty bus, in which nothing happens and no movement is visible except for the falling rain outside. When it is dusk, the bus starts running and eventually she makes her way to the old apartment from which she escapes in the beginning of the film. Each frame in this sequence conveys such incredible loneliness. She is always positioned within the city – in the middle of the traffic, on the skywalk, in public transportation, yet she is always the only human subject within the same frame. Her marginal status is made especially acute through her solitude within the busy city, the coldness in the rain, the darkness in the deserted bus, and the antagonistically barking German shepherd locked up behind bars in the street near the apartment. This passage of her loneliness builds up the tension of contrast to what happens next inside the apartment, when she confronts the picture of herself and its creator in a tight and dark space. It is here we see the enlarged picture of her profile at the crime scene, sometimes used as the official poster for this film.

From the inside, we see White Chick entering the apartment, which is now turned into a dark room by the photographer. At the end of this one single take which is mostly in darkness, the light is turned on –White Chick sees her own face on the wall, and finally collapses out of perhaps a mixture of fatigue, hunger and shock. Various scholars have argued that Yang does an admirable job in exposing the ineptitude and confusion on the photographer’s part in distinguishing between reality and fiction, as well as in his erotic desire of White Chick herself, through his portrayal of White Chick’s photo. Wilson, in her comparative study of Yang’s *Terrorizers* and Antonioni’s *Blow-Up*, compares the photographer here to Thomas in Antonioni’s film, as both of them are dedicated to their

cameras at all cost.<sup>66</sup> To Wilson, the prominence of the close-up image reveals more about the photographer's ignorance of the reality that exists beyond the frame. The young man knows only the image of White Chick that he has created – he tells her that “I’ll bring your picture with me to the army, you’ll stay with me and wait for me” – he is not able to differentiate life from the reality of his photos. Wilson points out that “when we find out later that White Chick was never serious about her relationship with the photographer, her photograph appears – in pieces – blowing apart in the breeze.”<sup>67</sup> The similarity between Yang and Antonioni has been pointed out by many film scholars, ranging from as early as Jameson’s celebrated essay to Wilson’s systematic and detailed cross-analysis between the two. However, Harlan’s suggestion on the subject matter is worth noting here: that despite the well-deserved analogy between Yang’s portrayal of city space and Antonioni’s, the former’s originality should be seen and examined.<sup>68</sup> Regarding the same scene, Chang’s analysis appears more thorough and detailed. Grounded in feminist film theory, Chang sees the film as capable of deconstructing the classical male gaze:

The photographer is the one on display, extracted from his voyeuristic, behind-the-camera position and seemingly transfixed and merged into the images of White Chick. He becomes the object of the viewer’s gaze, against which he is utterly defenseless. Yang’s camera reconfigures the power relation between male and female

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<sup>66</sup> Wilson, Chapter 2. This comparative study constitutes an entire chapter in her book on New Taiwanese Cinema. In addition to Yang’s *Terrorizers*, she also looks at Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Tsai Ming-Liang and Ang Lee’s films.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>68</sup> Harlan, 78. “Yang’s fans try to hoist him high with comparisons to Antonioni: the same eerie *trompe l’oeil* cityscapes, the same drifting anomie. The analogy’s deserved, but Yang is also an original, especially in a national cinema that apart from him and Hou Hsiao Hsien, has been chiefly notable for the potboiling squawks and flourishes of the martial arts film.”

characters through the intricate framing, reframing, and repositioning of the photographer and the object/image of his desire. (Chang, 123)

For Chang, the fact that although the photographer is able to capture White Chick's image with his camera but unable to possess her in real life gives power and agency to the girl. Furthermore, he makes the analogy between the rectangular shapes of the enlarged photograph and the highly compartmentalized urban structures in Taipei, thus arriving at the reading that pictures flutter when the wind blows hints at the undomesticated nature of White Chick – she is shown as “constantly resisting and evading any form of containment.”<sup>69</sup> The deconstruction is achieved through showing how the male photographer is consumed by his own gaze and his fantasy of the other sex and White Chick's exotic whiteness. Both Chang and Wilson suggest that the blown-up image reveals and emphasizes that the young male photographer has not fallen in love with a real person, but an idealized female character/face that is created by his own vision and his technical tool. Understanding this sequence only from the positioning of the gaze and the erotic relationship between the two is certainly insightful and intriguing, but it overlooks the power of the film language employed here. One has no knowledge or connection to reality when being inside of in this artificially created dark room. In this almost four-minute sequence that takes place entirely in the room, the close-up of the enlarged mosaic picture is shown four times. We see it again and again, but what are the effects and intentions behind this gesture?

The young girl's face is looking somewhere else. It is clear that she is not aware of the presence of another person who is taking a picture of her at that exact moment and will be

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 123.



obsessively watching her (or the image of her) afterwards. We live in an age just like this. With the omnipresence of video/image recorders, we are constantly being watched and watching others. With the dissolution of the boundary between the private and the public, ubiquitous voyeurs and ready availability of sex, are citizens of the modern world still capable of love, which used to be filled with excitement and mystery? The *mise-en-scène* of the room supports the close-up in posing this question. The redness of the blanket, the only vibrant, sensual, erotic color one can see inside the apartment is juxtaposed against the two characters who have come physically the closest in the film yet remain so distant from each other, against the enlarged close-up that embodies a “love” of an illusion, a static image. Questioning is sometimes more philosophically powerful than providing a statement as an answer. This sequence poses questions about the possibility and the nature of love through its use of close-ups and the color red.

If the face of White Chick is mediated through the glossy print of film photos, then Yu-Fen’s face is mediated through a television screen filled with noise and black lines, the glares and artificial colors of the screen. After seeing the unfolding of her life, the real lived experience alongside the creation of this novel, we hear a summary of it from her, in an interview, speaking in a content, light-hearted, even amused tone. Chang considers this as Yang’s critical treatment of the operation of commodified bourgeois literature, through the media’s obsession with the award-winning novelist.<sup>70</sup> Undoubtedly, the artificiality and the imperfect quality conveyed through the whole image is of paramount importance. In contrast to White Chick’s still photo, Chou Yu-Fen is very much aware of the camera. She is consciously performing for an audience who desires to hear a fascinating and inspiring story

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 127

behind her creation. The commercialized aspect of modern media has always been much indicted by scholars, most notably Adorno and Horkheimer. They argue that popular culture (film, radio, magazines, etc.) is akin to a factory producing standardized cultural goods, which are used to manipulate mass society into passivity.<sup>71</sup> However, they also believe that autonomous art has an emancipatory effect in making people see more clearly their status quo and reflect on it, unlike the standardization of cultural form that atrophies the capacity of the individual to think in a critical and autonomous way. Yang's film provides such an "autonomous art" that neither serves for any commercial ends nor to gratify the mass. His portrayal of Chou's close-up, mediated through TV screens, naturally reminds the spectator of an earlier close-up of her profile. Its use of the glass reflection is ingenious, a practice that is core to *Yi Yi*'s cinematography, but only exercised to a limited extent but with fascinating effect. After seeing her ex-boyfriend in his company in the beginning of the film, she walks over to a glass window, and we see a close-up of her profile. In the same shot, she pushes open the window, which is now at a right angle to the window frame, and we see a glass cleaner in the mid-air cleaning glasses, in the reflection of the glass window, juxtaposed right against her face. Within the frame, to the spectator, she seems to be looking directly at the cleaner, yet in reality she could not have been able to see the reflected sight from her angle. The highly dangerous nature of cleaning the external skyscraper's walls symbolizes the precariousness of her situation and impending choice, and also represents the irony in her proximity to real life yet at the same time being so distant from it. The relationship between

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<sup>71</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Entertainment as Mass Deception." Benjamin, too, has stated that the spectator can receive film in a state of passivity.

art and life, the embodiment of which Chou stands for, will be discussed in more depth in the next section.

The third woman of the story is given the least story time. The photographer's girlfriend is perhaps most remembered for throwing a tantrum at her boyfriend upon discovering that he is obsessed with White Chick's face. The close-up that is given to her is not her face, understandably, as her face has been replaced by White Chick's. But before her attempted suicide, a close-up is given to her hand, holding the note that the boy has left her that reads "No need to look for me. I will not come back here, ever" right on top of a similarly enlarged mosaic print of the girl's picture. We are given a medium shot of her upper body, and then a close-up of her hand holding the note, standing in the lightly-moving lace curtains, a tear drops down on it. The visual intertwining between this girl and White Chick is sewn together ingeniously, as the following analysis will show.

In a memorable scene almost entirely shot in darkness, White Chick's mother smokes and listen to "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" by the Platters, and gently walks over to her daughter's bedside and strokes her face. Chang makes a discerning observation regarding the design on the lighter that she uses – it is a U.S. army-issued cigarette lighter engraved with a First Cavalry insignia.<sup>72</sup> The slow tilt, her pink and silky kimono, and the sentimental music all suggests a longing of an absence, which is punctuated by a reverse shot of White Chick lying in bed with her face in complete darkness. Her face does appear in the next shot, but only in a series of pictures taken by the young male photographer. The sweet music continues into the next sequence, while we are visually given a montage of the fight scene between the

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<sup>72</sup> Chang, 125.

young couple, as the girl finds out about her boyfriend's obsession with another girl's image. Prints are taken down, film strips are shattered on the ground, the curtains that constitute the dark room are stripped away, etc. Behind the lightly dancing lace curtain near the balcony, we see a medium shot of the girl shouting at the boy, then a closer shot of the boy looking at the girl making a scene off-screen, and finally, one of the most mysterious shots of the film, which is the disappearance of the boy, from the girl's PoV. If the sequence just ends here, we can try to make sense of it by understanding the disappearance as an analogy and foreshadowing of the boy's leaving her. But the sequence goes on: in the next shot Yang breaks the 180-degree rule, and the girl runs up to the balcony where the boy is supposed to be.<sup>73</sup> Then we are shown her PoV – a high angle shot of the boy walking in the street with his camera, away from the apartment building. This montage juxtaposes emotionally forceful fragments against each other, and also reveals the impossibility of this happening in a spatio-temporal reality. The impossibility would catch the audience by surprise, and provoke thinking – what exactly happens? Since the boy could not have jumped right off the balcony, then the reality of the diegetic space should be questioned, and the apparatus of camera and editing is revealed.

When we see the girl again, an insert of the emptiness in the corner shows that the photographer has moved out. In this segment, we see beautiful black-and-white enlarged pictures of the girl taped to the wall, very much similar to the close-ups of *White Chick*, indicating a replacement and change of heart. The allegory that the two girls' close-up images embody is at least two-fold. Narratively, the close-ups represent the photographer's

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<sup>73</sup> For continuity's sake, a conventional take will require the girl to run towards the balcony from camera right in this scene. But she runs from camera left.

(mis)taking the image as the object of his *eros*. Meta-narratively, Yang presents the close-ups this way to reveal the modern obsession with images and videos that are pure surface and have no depth, and the ephemerality of the obsession. Yang's choice of wardrobe is also significant, and surprisingly, the observation has never been mentioned before, even in articles that specifically analyze the portrayal of women in the film (Chang). All the three principle women in the film only wear white shirts/polo-shirts. The whiteness in what they wear corroborates with the depiction of their real characters with close-up images, that they both reveal a sense of objectification of women from the male gaze and also from society. The purity, innocence, simplicity and sweetness that others expect of them is contrasted by their way of being that involves crimes, pranks, suicides, and adulteries. The contrast aims to unveil the depth in those characters and cautions the spectator to see the all-pervasive societal judgment of females and realize the complexities they encompass. The relationship between the image and the person, external opinion and actual human existence, surface and depth, fiction and reality, both within the film and external to it, will be examined more closely in the next section.

## **Section 2: Art and Life**

Jameson has devoted an entire chapter of his book *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* to *The Terrorizers*.<sup>74</sup> Although he never uses the exact words, both Chang and Liu when referring to his analysis of the film, describe him as considering this film the “postmodern film *par excellence*.”<sup>75</sup> Regardless of the nuance, Jameson's analysis of the film in a postmodern framework has been undoubtedly influential in both postmodernism studies and research on

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<sup>74</sup> Chapter 2, “Remapping Taipei.” From *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*.

<sup>75</sup> Chang, 117; Liu, 115.

Taiwanese New Cinema. Weaver and Chang both give Jameson an acknowledging nod and work mainly in his framework of understanding *The Terrorizers* as manifesting postmodern elements. Respectively, Weaver puts forth a distinction in the film's portrayal of the relationship between art and life contrasting Antonioni's *Blow-Up*, and Chang works to reveal how Yang deconstructs the classical male gaze. On the other hand, Berry and Liu take issue with Jameson's reading. Berry argues that Jameson is not able to view the film within a Taiwanese context, and thus misreads the implication and significance of some key aspects of the film.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, Liu calls Jameson's reading "superficial" for not taking the particularity of Taipei as a city into account. She especially disagrees with Jameson on his devastating analysis of Li Li-Chung and resists his categorizing Yang as a "Third World" filmmaker.<sup>77</sup>

Despite some of the criticism that ensued, Jameson's article, as one of the earliest analysis of the film still deserves to be examined and engaged with closely – his attention to the details and film language in the film is admirable and ideas brilliant. I am, however, more sympathetic to Wilson's reading of the film as "the second modernist iteration" of Antonioni's *Blow-Up*, as both "cause the viewer to ponder the relationship between reality and art by showing the protagonist cross between those very lines."<sup>78</sup> As mentioned before (page 57), Yang's film deserves to be read in its own right and this section will engage with Jameson's observations and concepts, but question the validity and exact nature of the

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<sup>76</sup> For instance, responding to Jameson's analysis that the film condemns the rise of a technologically superior but shallow image-based society, Berry says: "No locally informed contemporary viewer of the film could possibly miss the subtle sarcasm directed at the dominant role played by the *fukan* institution in Taiwan's cultural life in the 1970s and 1980s' (Berry, 17).

<sup>77</sup> Liu, 115-117.

<sup>78</sup> Wilson, 70.

alleged “postmodernism” as Jameson understands it. I will look at the narrative structure and its accompanying film language in the ending of the film, and a still insert in the beginning of the film, and explore the relationship between art, life and truth in general, and between subject, object and the world more specifically.

Jameson starts by pointing out that the modern age is “notoriously the moment in which the individual life is driven so deeply into its isolated ‘point of view’ that it is no longer capable of peeping out above the barrier.”<sup>79</sup> The modern relativistic plot came into being so as to overcome this desperation caused by being driven back into our individual and private isolation. He coins the term Synchronous Monadic Simultaneity (SMS) to identify this narrative and plot device: individual characters are brought together by accidents and peripeteias, under some form of God’s design. Jameson examines *The Terrorizers* under this lens by juxtaposing it against Andre Gide’s *Counterfeiters* (1925), which he terms as “the very prototype of this older classic modernist text” (121). The two texts are similar in that they both employ parallel narrative strands and construct a dénouement to bring all individuals together. However, for Jameson, there are quintessential differences between how it is done in each text. He identifies three main contrasts between the two and on the basis of these three distinctions, he advocates for a “relatively more postmodern type” (148) of interpretation for the film. These distinctions will be explicated, discussed and an alternative to his understanding will be explored here.

First, Jameson points out the general repulsiveness of all characters in *The Terrorizers*, as “all signally lacking in any of the secret merits that might encourage our

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<sup>79</sup> Jameson, 115.

complicity” (124). This distinguishes the film from any typical modern text in which moral/ethical judgment is always present to the characters on the reader’s part. The self-pity of Li is not redeemed by his active betrayal of a friend/colleague hoping for a promotion, nor by his willful obliviousness to his wife’s general being and happiness; Chou is “narcissistically unhappy” (124); both the young photographer and White Chick are extremely self-centered and characterized by their “ego-indulgence and narcissistic indifference to the outside world” (125). For Jameson, this lack of moral or personal commitment to these characters is rooted in historical and social differences between the modern period and postmodern – in our time, the postmodern, such moral judgments are “irrelevant or at least inoperative” (128). This reductionist conclusion seems problematic at least on two fronts. First of all, is what Jameson calls “Gidean moralism” (128) truly that clear and distinct in modern or any pre-postmodern literature? Madame Bovary, Anna Karenina, Ivan Karamazov all are examples of fascinating and complex characters the moral judgment of whom would be beside the point. Even in the Ancient Greek time, Sophoclean tragedies point out clearly that moral judgment is never an easy procedure, given the complexities and differences between divine law and human law. Second, the fact that we are not complicit or devoted to any of the characters in *The Terrorizers* does not necessarily mean that no judgment is involved in Yang’s presentation of them. For example, when Li is talking to his colleague, who enquires about Li’s family situation, he is confronted with a stark coldness in reaction that is nothing but a harsh yet quite understandable judgment. The scene is done in one long take that pans as the characters walk together. Li informs the colleague that it is not the case that his wife has left, it is just that she is a female novelist, who needs some space. The colleague then asks, “what does she write about?” To which Li



answers, "I don't know. I don't read novels." As if fed up with Li's self-deception and lack of effort, the colleague, without saying a single word, simply turns and walks away. The mise-en-scène of the hospital scenes is always filled with an intensely warm yellow in the background. The warmth of the sunset color contrasts sharply with the coldness present in the hospital: friend's betrayal, trite gossip, the immediate superior's blatant avoidance, failure of promotion, etc. Jameson's incorporation of "death of the subject" (128) to understanding the impropriety of the category of evil to the characters requires more justification as it is possible that the concept of evil is still relevant, that morality still remains even in totalitarianism, which is fundamentally caused by a sense of "loneliness" in the modern age.<sup>80</sup>

The second distinction that Jameson puts forth is the key presence and portrayal of youth in these two texts. This point can be understood as related to the first one. Categories of *Bildung* or pedagogy, ideals of character formation, are deemed as "peculiarly inappropriate" (130) in *The Terrorizers*. Jameson is hinting that the literary trope of characters going through experiences in order to be better educated or achieve better knowledge about the world and themselves is no longer present or relevant in postmodern texts. Instead, what has come to replace this kind of focus on individual development, is "as *The Terrorizers* shows, a displacement from the ethical and the pedagogical-formative towards the psychological as allegory or symptom of the mutilation of individual subjects by

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<sup>80</sup> Arendt, Chapter 13. She makes an insightful observation that industrial revolution leads to the sentiment of uprootedness and supplantedness, which intensifies our loneliness and isolation. Loneliness is the ground for terror, the essence of Totalitarianism. Loneliness also explains the lack of "meaning" seen in life, and the active embracing of stringent logicity, endorsed by totalitarian regimes. But this by no means explain away the category of evil.

the system itself” (130). Jameson classifies the postmodern phenomenon as a “system-specific” one: “the various forms which reification and commodification and the corporate standardizations of media society imprint on human subjectivity and existential experience” (131). Thus, for Jameson, the difficulty of the subject to constitute itself under the new system is a key feature of the film. His brilliant analysis of each character in terms of their embodiment of both a power that threatens and destroys along with a misery of confinement and powerlessness is illuminating, and his observation regarding Li Li-Chung’s compulsive handwashing is especially helpful. Jameson understands Li as the “quintessential loser (145)”, the repeated handwashing of whom stands in for his inner insecurity or inferiority complex. Furthermore, Jameson’s social and historical theoretical framework necessarily leads him to see Li as a “national allegory” of Taiwan’s dependency on the new world system of late capitalism – the frustration of its inability to join the First World and its effects on the subjects (which are already abolished) in the global bureaucratic system.

Jameson describes the ending of the film as “surely one of the most astonishing scenes in recent cinema” (147) and resists the “modernist” interpretation that is tempted to tie up loose ends and arrive at a coherent overarching explanation. He sees “a certain indecidability” (149) to the series of multiple and mutually exclusive denouements and rests a postmodern reading on this ambiguity. However, despite Yang’s subtle film language, the apparentness of this “indecidability” is unclear. The possibilities of each sequence to have been carried out in real diegetic time seem unequal. The ghastly suicide scene, situated in a traditional bath house, is the only factual facet of the diegesis. The sequence of the shooting spree, not only has many logical impossibilities (e.g. how does Li know where exactly to find White Chick, etc.), but is also suggested as an inner fantasy of Li’s by the close-up shot of

Li's forlorn and contemplative face in the mirror right before the sequence. The final scene, which does not end with Li but his wife and her lover in bed, clearly posed as a revision of the fantasy/dream, furthermore points to the fantastical nature of the shooting spree.

Therefore, in reading the ending of the film, Jameson's appeal to the validity of both modern and postmodern alternatives, naturalizing each other as meaningful categories seems unconvincing. The fictitiousness of the shooting spree necessarily intensifies the actual ending – instead of a synchronous monadic fanciful power that could grant the gratification to Li by revenging all that have done him injustice, from his point of view, all that he has in control of in reality is speeding up his own demise. The source or the undeniable sadness and helplessness exuded by the redness of Li's splashed blood is more universal than what Jameson attributes it to, namely the Third-world situation itself. This sadness, even if we remain in a historical understanding, would belong to an entire epoch of late-modern mode of existence.

Following Descartes and Kant, the rise of modernity is characterized by a radical divide between subject and object. The impossibility of us getting to the objects as and in themselves does not hinder but in fact facilitates the process of technologization, through which we understand objects and entities not as meaningful in themselves but simply resources to be utilized and optimized. The problem is exacerbated when the subject itself is being objectified, conceived as meaningless entity to be enhanced and optimized, as shown most evidently in Li's case. He seeks promotion, forsaking the most fundamental human decency, because he thinks the title itself is equivalent to success and affirmation; he is married to Chou, surprisingly to all of their classmates/friends, without putting any effort into knowing her work, life or mental state, perhaps because the empty title of marriage is

satisfying enough; he only goes to his friend when he needs help, and is unwilling to let anyone know of his real situation – failure of getting promoted or his wife leaving him. The core of all of these manifestations lies not in that the category of subject is meaningless, but in a deeper cause that renders this seemingly meaninglessness.

All of the characters are extremely self-centered but not self-aware. They lack a certain depth or inwardness that is required to have a better sense of self, the world and meaning in life. The kitchen argument between Li and Chou, positioned as shot/reverse shot but through a relative mismatch in their position, shows that no real communication is taking place even at a critical moment like this. Chou's monologue is directed at the camera, breaking the fourth wall, while Li's is not. Intersubjectivity seems impossible when there is no self-reflection in social interactions.

The young photographer reprimands White Chick by asking her what pleasure she gets out of placing phone pranks, she asks back "do you find pleasure in snapping random photos?", to which he answers, "this is serious stuff." He justifies his claim by telling her that he has perfect vision. Just like how Li would be content with his success and life by an external empty job title, the young photographer measures his talent and duty by a quantitative number that expresses nothing else but the sharpness of the physical world to his naked eyes. Similarly, White Chick seeks to ease her ennui by extending it outside to others and externalizing her own marginal experience. Meanwhile, the young photographer's girlfriend feels that she has nothing else to live for with the absence of an other's undiluted attention on her. The *Terrorizers*, with its relentless honesty in revealing the lack of an inwardness in each these intertwined characters, and how they end up interfering and hurting each other, is not a mere complacent observation about the system they inhabit, but itself a

pedagogical message expressing that self-reflection is key if not to happiness per se, then at least to a well-informed way of life.

The third difference remains the main motivation for Jameson's proposal of reading this film as postmodern – the intensification of the urban framework which serves as the primary message of the narrative form itself. As suggested in the title of his chapter “*Remapping Taipei*”, Jameson affirms the spatiality of the film, which contrasts the temporality of modernism, and observes the insistent relationship established in the film between the individual space and the city as a whole. “Taipei is thus mapped and configured as a superimposed set of boxed dwelling spaces in which the characters are all in one way or another confined” (154), and it is especially evident in the portrayal of the women's situations in the film. This consideration of the relationship between the inhabited world and the individual characters is significant, but I propose an alternative understanding of the film in terms of its postmodern agenda, which contests the idea of the death of the subject and a localized understanding of the urban spatiality in the film. I believe that the universality in Yang's film transcends the specific social, political and historical framework that situates Li's and others' destiny within Taiwan's “third-worldness” in a global capitalist system. This reading is limited in that it does not address the film's potential in engaging with a grander epistemological and ontological concern of self-knowledge and meaning in life.

There is a striking similarity between one of the inserts at the beginning of the film and Van Gogh's painting (*A Pair of Shoes*, 1886), famously analyzed by Heidegger in his essay “*The Origin of the Work of Art*.” Through this time-image, Heidegger's view regarding the power of art and his understanding of postmodernity will be put forward.

In the beginning sequence, the photographer wakes up and hears the gunshot. We then see a series of montages that indicates the process of him getting ready to go out for an adventure to the crime scene. We are presented with medium shots of his green jacket being picked up, then the center camera, among many on the ground, is taken up, and then instead of following the same pattern – shoes being put on by him, we see a close-up of a pair of dark work boots. It is a still frame in which no action is portrayed except the mere passing of time. The position of the shoes, the color tone, the serenity and power of the image all strike an incredible resemblance to Van Gogh's painting.

Perhaps Yang is not paying homage to Van Gogh consciously through this time-image, and if that is the case, it simply suggests interesting mechanisms shared by great artists through their unconscious mind working to realize a special vision and idea. In both images, lights predominantly come from the right, the shoes are centered and shoelaces are dangling, especially of the right shoe. Heidegger performs an intriguing reading of three art works in exploring what art is and the relationship between truth and art – an Ancient Greek temple, C. F. Meyer's poem "Roman Fountain", and Van Gogh's painting. Comparing the two images, one significant difference is the background. Heidegger describes: "From Van Gogh's painting we cannot even tell where these shoes stand. There is nothing surrounding this pair of peasant shoes in or to which they might belong – only an undefined space" (Heidegger, 33).<sup>81</sup> The pair of shoes in Yang's frame is situated on the wooden floor, before a shelf with anonymous books and files. However, this is all that we can gather about its

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<sup>81</sup> For a brilliant analysis that brings out the importance of the concept "nothing" in this sentence, see Thomson (2011), Chapter 3. According to Thomson, this "nothing" is not nothing at all, but as that "in which and to which" the shoes can indeed belong. It is in this "nothing", there is a tension of truth emerging and withdrawing, therefore manifests what Heidegger calls "the essential strife" between "earth and world" (Thomson, 89)

surrounding. With no establishing shot, we do not have a clear perception where the shoes are inside the apartment; more importantly, we are only shown the shoes themselves, unlike in the previous shots. We do not even know whether the young photographer wears them out on this particular adventure, or whether the shoes actually belong to him. Just like in Van Gogh's painting, all we are given is the worn-outness and repose of the shoes themselves, the knowledge that the shoes have been used and they are reliable and useful, and *nothing* else. It is a time-image like this, by not following its previous montage examples, compels the spectator to wonder about the shoes in themselves, the owner, what kind of stories have the owner captured wearing these shoes, etc. In essence, the aura that envelopes this pair of shoes entices our curiosity by establishing various possible relationship between the object and the person, and the person and his world. On a grander scale, the film's emphasis on spatiality, as pointed out by Jameson, urges us to reestablish an originary experience with our surroundings, an experience that breaks the subject/object divide by fully immersing us in it.

Upon reflecting on the equipment quality and the usefulness of the shoes that the painting conveys, Heidegger comes to the realization that Van Gogh's painting "is the disclosure of what the equipment, the pair of peasant shoes, is in truth. This entity emerges into the unconcealedness of its being" (Heidegger, 35). This emergence of truth, for Heidegger, is the ontological power of works of art. However, truth is present only as the conflict between bringing forth and withdrawing, unveiling and concealing. Yang's films, as works of art, bring forward truth that is only visible through a continuous engagement. His works serve as an example of the new poetics that Rancière envisions: "The new poetics frames a new hermeneutics, taking upon itself the task of making society conscious of its own secrets, by leaving the noisy stage of political claims and doctrines and sinking to the

depths of the social, to disclose the enigmas and fantasies hidden in the intimate realities of everyday life.”<sup>82</sup> Chapters II and III are attempts to make some of these disclosure in his film language clear.

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<sup>82</sup> Rancière, 145.



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