

Edward Yang's *The Terrorizers*

By Jimmy Weaver for <http://www.theseventhart.org/>

“The bombs we plant in each other are ticking away”
-Edward Yang

Edward Yang's film *The Terrorizers* (*Kongbu Fenzi*, 1986), part of the New Taiwan Cinema movement of the 1980's, examines the effects rapid mobilization had on Taipei and its citizens. Frederic Jameson's well-circulated article, *Remapping Taipei*, notably declares *The Terrorizers* to not just be a postmodern film, but *the* postmodern film. The film's juxtaposed stories about relationships are connected not causally, as we expect from many films – especially network narratives – but instead through accident. These accidental connections rise to the level of something like causality because of the pressures of place and speed, which we will explore through the writings of Paul Virilio, as well as through the formal devices used by Yang. For Jameson, the site of the crowded, hyperglobalized city, like Taipei, is the place where the accidental is likely and consequential (129). Meanwhile, for Virilio, the urban simultaneity Jameson writes about is heightened by the hyper speed technologies that were vital for Taiwan's economic miracle and Taipei's subsequent modernization. *The Terrorizers* is not a meta-reflective film about the struggle to create art that mirrors life, but instead an interrogation of the pressures of urban spaces as well as the technologies that mediate the connection between individual subjectivities in these increasingly fractured spaces.

The Terrorizers presents four simultaneous, but often obliquely connected stories of contemporary Taipei citizens. The film begins with an unnamed photographer rushing outside of his apartment to snag some photos of a shoot-out in an alleyway. He becomes obsessed with the image of a Eurasian girl he captures while she is frantically escaping the crime scene. The girl,

known as the White Chick, is a part time prostitute and associates with the underbelly of Taipei society. Meanwhile, Li and Zhou Yufen, an affluent Mainland couple, are professionals who are drifting apart while both deal with challenges in their work life. Li, a doctor, struggles to gain a valuable promotion, going as far as to sabotage his closest friend, and greatest rival, at the hospital. Zhou Yufen toils away at her novel with little success. The White Chick is imprisoned in her bedroom by her mother and kills time by making a series of prank phone calls. One of her random victims is Zhou Yufen, who is shocked when the White Chick tells her that she is Li's mistress. After a brief investigation which results in an encounter with the photographer, Zhou Yufen uses the White Chick's call as an excuse to leave Li for her old flame, the head of a prestigious publishing house, while also finding inspiration from the lie to finish her novel.

An exposition of the film's story belies *The Terrorizers'* complex plot structure. The film's opening shoot-out could be an example of what Jameson describes as the "connector of destinies" (115). Yet, as Yang's film demonstrates, the formal techniques of cross-cutting and parallel montage can create these connections just as effectively. The fact that *The Terrorizers'* several plot lines are merely contiguous for the bulk of the film, rather than causally related, is jarring for viewers accustomed to the popularity of character-driven story structures that reward their audience by deliberately tying together the strands of these network narratives in a clear manner. Jameson calls this tendency the "irony of synchronous monadic simultaneity," which implies a sense of providence or narrative unity that "corresponds to nothing in lived experience" (115). As Yang's film progresses, the shoot-out never develops into a privileged narrative unit in and of itself. It is simply an event *in medias res* that is never provided with a conclusion. For Yang, this shoot-out is simply one event out of many occurring in Taipei and is no more or less

important than the dissolution of a marriage, a disaffected youth's search for artistic fulfillment, or a marginalized girl's struggle to survive in this hostile urban space.

Instead, this opening sequence freely moves from space to space with little indication of how the segments are spatially or causally related. The film begins with the photographer and his girlfriend in bed, but a graphic match abruptly moves the action to another, similar interior space: Li and Zhou Yufen's bedroom, which also contains a balcony. A third interior setting, the derelict apartment where the White Chick is fleeing from a violent client by jumping off another balcony, is introduced and further upsets the viewer's sense of filmic space. No establishing shots locate these settings nor does the narrative seem to justify these sudden changes. Yang's editing style in *The Terrorizers* rejects the film viewer's inclination to reconcile unconnected segments. The juxtaposition of shots does not result in any new, clear meaning. Instead the relationships between Yang's shots remain amorphous, connected only by graphic similarities that suggest a connection without providing it.

The amorphous nature of the film on the formal level is mirrored by the relationship between characters on the story level. Li and Zhou Yufen's marriage is destroyed by the White Chick's casual lie. Zhou Yufen takes this fiction as fact, only to reconstitute it, once again, as fiction through her novel. Ironically, the White Chick's lie about infidelity is actualized, albeit in an inverted manner, when Zhou Yufen reunites with her lover. Li's attempt to gain a promotion is predicated by another lie, one about his colleague. When he does not receive the raise, he crafts a false story of success he recounts to his police officer friend. The photographer's iconic and fetishized portrait of the White Chick never matches up to her complicated, and oftentimes, nefarious nature. This portrait, like the structure of Yang's film, is delicately assembled out of fragments, pieces which threaten to scatter from the slightest gust of wind.

This troubled relationship between the real and the mediated, a thoroughly postmodernist trope, is perhaps best exemplified by *The Terrorizers*' main cinematic intertext: Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966). Antonioni's modernist film is alluded to in the photographer and also questions the veracity of representation. Yet Antonioni's film, like Zhou Yufen's novel, refashions incidents into patterns to reach a conclusive, if enigmatic, ending. A murder may or may not have been committed and Antonioni's photographer may or may not have captured evidence of it. What is for certain by the end of *Blow-Up* is that the photographer's subjectivity has been thoroughly examined and he has reached new conclusions about his capacity to apprehend the world around him. Yang's film refuses this kind of ending. Instead, he pits the "modernist interpretive temptation" (144) and its penchant for subjectively motivated conclusions, Antonioni's film included, against the film's decidedly postmodernist form, which favours contingency over causality.

This contiguity is fueled by Taipei as a location. Urban space has always been a place of chance encounters and life-altering accidents, but Yang's Taipei of the 1980's is not Antonioni's London of the 1960's. Taipei is indicative of late-capitalist Third World urbanization, which has made it a node in the global exchange of capital and ideas, further facilitated through high-speed technology. Yet the negative byproduct of this form of urbanization, which "contracts" time by heavily mediating communication, Paul Virilio notes, is the "loss of orientation regarding the other" (5). Commonplace objects, such as the cameras, phones, and televisions emphasized in *The Terrorizers*, have forever altered the modern urban setting for this reason.

For instance, Yang rarely shows his characters in *The Terrorizers* moving about Taipei. Instead, the city becomes a series of "boxlike packages that contain, separate, and isolated inhabitants" (Anderson 94). Yang's camera rarely does it show the character's passing through

the public spaces of Taipei, but often occupies a space long before the character enters the frame for that scene's action. This "temps mort," or dead time, is another trace of Antonioni's influence. This term describes a slackening of narrative causality and an almost indifferent authorial point of view, and is expressed through shot durations that extend before and/or after characters leave the frame. Antonioni and Yang use temps mort to elevate the thematic and emotional importance of their characters' physical surroundings, rather than adhering to popular filmmaking conventions that privilege characters and story above all else in dictating a shot's duration. Yang's use of temp mort conveys the isolation between the 'boxlike packages' and the character most emphatically confined to her space is the White Chick, literally imprisoned by her mother and immobilized by her broken leg. But her confinement, like everyone else's, is what Virilio calls an "interactive confinement" (7) one that never truly isolates an individual. In one stretch of boredom, she chooses a victim to prank call by picking a name out of the phonebook. Zhou Yufen receives her call entirely by chance. This new iteration of urban simultaneity and chance, where a stranger can intrude upon private life and private space, is enabled by technology, which allows this intrusion to occur without human contact.

Urban chance, then, operates at several levels in *The Terrorizers*. The motivation behind prostitution and criminality, the film's first iteration of urban chance and violence, doubly implicates the White Chick and are linked back to her parentage, with its sub-plot of American imperialism and abandonment. Confined to her room as a punishment for her actual transgressions, the White Chick contents herself with virtual ones. Her motivation to make random, malicious phone calls might also be viewed as adolescent rebellion or some social pathology, but Yang is interested in their determinative effects more than their cause. That the

Taipei police are inept, late, and bored, signals how little interest there is in establishing even civil order in the city, let alone meaningful human connections.

The conclusion of the random phone call scene is an emphatically slow pan across the cord of the White Chick's phone. The public space between individuals and the site of their meeting has been replaced by fiber optic wire and computer screens, which simultaneously connect and perpetuate our spatial separation. This reduction of public space does not eliminate the old accidents of urban simultaneity, which *Blow-Up*'s chance encounter between the photographer and the mysterious woman in a public park so perfectly exemplifies. This encounter in the park can be seen as an aberration or interruption for *Blow-Up*'s photographer, who otherwise leads a sequestered life within his self-chosen network of artists and models. It is precisely the desire for photographs outside the confines of the studio and its acquiescing models that results in potentially capturing a murder in photos, meeting the woman and being pulled into the real world, so to speak, through the artistic process. Yang's characters cannot avoid these unwanted chance encounters, even in the presumed privacy of their homes. The film equally collapses the space in between their presumed solitude through its parallel compositions to mirror this experience for the spectator. These accidental encounters remain a constant in the two cities and their respective developmental stages, modernism and postmodernism, thereby reflecting Virilio's contention that the accidental is the "diagnostic of technology" ("Author" 20). If to invent the train is also to invent the train wreck, as Virilio famously declared, then to invent the camera is to invent the recording of a mysterious event; to invent the phone is to invent the treacherous phone call Zhou Yufen receives.

Yang skillfully demonstrates the accidental results of this tele-connection when Zhou Yufen wins an award for her book and is shown on multiple television screens relating how she

arrived at this story of a marriage. The screens broadcast her false explanation of a fiction inspired by a lie enacted at random. These explanations, carried through the media, make their way to the photographer, who uses them to craft his own scenario of how Zhou Yufen arrived at his doorstep. The photographer, in turn, relays his misconstrued scenario to Li, which Yang shows through a series of still photographs. While the photographer, Zhou Yufen, and Li's actions are all prompted by mediated fictions, the ensuing consequences are painfully real. Zhou Yufen leaves Li and admonishes him for being unable to decipher between the fiction of her novel and the reality of their relationship. Li finds his ultimate recourse for agency by retreating into fantasy. His bloody dream, in which he brutally murders Zhou Yufen's lover, is predicated by his own, real suicide. Yang removes the viewer from Li's dream the same way he has moved the spectator throughout Taipei: by a series of graphic matches that show the splintering wood of a doorframe followed by a splattering of blood. Just as this hyper-accelerated world has challenged notions of causality and subjectivity, for Yang it also seems to have altered our notions of reality and fiction. The two intermingle so often and so freely in the film, but not in an overly didactic way.

To read Yang's *Terrorizers* through both Jameson and Virilio is to read the film as an examination of how social organization is less relational than it is accidental, mediated, and contributing to violence. In terms of place, Taipei is shown as devoid of any common public spaces except the shopping area where the White Chick loiters and the spherical water tank, an enigmatic image repeated several times during the film that, like Yasujiro Ozu's pillow shots, removes the viewer from the locus of drama through undefined space. Instead, Yang encases his characters in their private-but-penetrable spaces or the multinational locales of the hospital, hotel, and publishing house. The shots of a slight breeze ruffling curtains or of rainwater

dribbling into a golden puddle are rare interruptions in the otherwise gray, postmodern city the same way they were for Antonioni's Rome in *L'Eclisse*. Like the use of temps mort, these moments express the importance of valuing what lies in the space between individuals, between the story's action, in order to better understand how urban alienation occurs. However, by so brazenly recapitulating Antonioni's techniques, Yang is not only engaging in the pastiche of postmodernism, but also conveying how Antonioni's lessons have not been learned. The acceleration of technology and therefore culture has only amplified these concerns in the hyperglobalized city.

The Terrorizers, like its modernist spiritual predecessor, *Blow-Up*, dramatizes the ways in which urban space facilitates life-altering chance encounters. While Antonioni's photographer is forced to question the utility of his medium and the veracity of constructed narratives, he ultimately learns to accept not knowing, exemplified in his participation in a mime troupe's imaginary tennis game. Yang's post-modern film, however, does not permit the same type of revelation. In the new, hyper-connected space of Taipei, personal trauma is a phone call away and can occur without explanation or subsequent revelation. Yang offers no solution, instead only reminding us once again, "The bombs we plant in each other are ticking away."

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