

ing a dream about a beautiful future. With the beginning of a new era, the red sun embodies a symbol of hope. Nevertheless, not only is the sun remote but the sorghum in the foreground is so thick that the sun can barely penetrate the dense undergrowth. What a long, arduous way we still have to travel before we attain the beautiful future of the red sun! And will the pious sentiments of the little boy's incantation really bring us any closer to that red sun? In China's current drive toward modernization, it simply cannot afford to ignore the message of *Red Sorghum*.

While the film has achieved international success, it has aroused a serious controversy in China. Almost all the major papers in China have been involved in the dispute. Hundreds of articles and letters about *Red Sorghum* have been published there. Many of them commend the film's great achievement and many others strongly criticize the film because it exposes the backward side of Chinese culture, which they view as an affront to the nation. Even though most people in China have already accepted the idea of modernization, many people still cannot tolerate any negative criticism of China's traditions since they are so deeply rooted in that culture. This strange contradiction is actually a great impediment to China's effort to modernization. At the press conference following the screening of *Red Sorghum* at this year's New York film festival, Wu Tianming, director of the Xian Film Studio, made a brief but powerful statement about the current dispute in China over *Red Sorghum*: A person who does not have the courage to admit his/her shortcomings can hardly make any progress; a nation that does not have the courage to admit its defects is doomed.

—ZHANG JIA-XUAN

## THE TERRORIZER

Director: Yang Te-ch'ang (Edward Yang). Script: Hsiao Yeh, Yang Te-ch'ang. Producer: Hsiao Yeh. Editor: Liao Ching-sung. Photography: Chang Chan. Golden Harvest (Hong Kong)/Central Motion Picture Corporation (Taiwan)

An issue facing all serious film-makers in Asia is their relationship to the West, its ideas and its cinema. Curiously enough, in striking a balance between their own national cinema and international imports, film-makers who diverge from

the already assimilated Hollywood style risk accusations of being too Western and subsequently alienating their audience at home. One of the Asian directors willing to risk marginalization is Taiwan's Yang Te-ch'ang (Edward Yang), who has consistently turned to European cinema for his model to form critiques of specific concern to Taiwanese. In his most recent film, *The Terrorizer* (*Kongbu fenzi*, 1986), Yang experiments with modernist political film-making and establishes himself as the most daring innovator of the New Chinese Cinema.<sup>1</sup>

Before considering Yang's film, however, it would be appropriate to explore his national context. Despite being one of the most exciting national cinemas in Asia, virtually nothing has been published in the English-language press about Taiwan.<sup>2</sup> The heritage of Taiwanese film lies in the prewar industry of Shanghai, where most of the old-guard film-makers came from. They migrated to the island with Chiang Kai-shek in 1949, and initiated a shaky industry based on the same genres used in Shanghai. With the formation of the Central Motion Picture Corporation (CMPC) in 1954, the KMT taxed imported films and channeled the money to these Taiwanese producers, a system in place to this day. These films were made by and for immigrants from the mainland, and were characteristically full of nostalgia for precommunist China.

The industry became healthier in the 1960s, following the general trend set by the economy. New genres began to develop, the strongest of which was *ai-ching wen-yi p'ien*: melodramatic tearjerkers based on popular fiction, primarily the novels of Ch'iuung Yao. According to Tony Rayns, in the 1970s a gap developed between the film-makers and their audiences; as the mainland genres continued to replicate themselves, they failed to respond to the changing demographics.<sup>3</sup> The younger generation of movie-goers were born and raised in Taiwan and found this formulaic film-making far removed from their social reality.

As the box office began to reflect this problem, the CMPC initiated a series of portmanteau films intended to breathe new life into their stale industry. The first film was called *In Our Time* (*Guangyin de gushi*, 1982), and its four directors were young intellectuals, three of whom had studied cinema at American universities (including Yang Te-ch'ang). The success

of *In Our Time* led to a CMPC policy of supporting new talent through portmanteau films, giving them a chance to make short, personal films free of commercial pressure. Nearly all of the new directors made the jump to features, and within a year or two were becoming a presence in the Taiwanese industry.

These film-makers, who would soon constitute the New Taiwan Cinema, pursued an alternative brand of film-making; they explored new production modes, switching from postsynchronous to live sound and reconfiguring crew responsibilities. They experimented with television in the ground-breaking series *11 Women* (*11-ko niuzhen*, 1981), and worked collectively, often living in the same house as each pursued his or her individual projects. They developed a realism based primarily on the classical Hollywood style, focusing on women's issues and using dialects other than that spoken in the city of Taipei. For the first time, Taiwanese films directly addressed the problems of contemporary life in Taiwan, attracting a new audience both on and off the island.

While they've never enjoyed a wide release outside of the foreign film-festival circuit, Yang's films have been well received in Europe and the United States, which could have something to do with his relationship to the West, which is far more intimate than that of other Asian film-makers. After obtaining an engineering degree from a Taiwanese university in the late sixties, he left home to study in the United States. By 1972, he received a master's degree in computer science from Florida State University, before spending a year at the University of Southern California film school in 1974. He worked in the computer field for several years, and then returned to Taiwan to begin a career in cinema.

In his first year back home, he shot *Duckweed* (1981), a 2 1/2-hour TV show, and an episode of *11 Women*. His chance to work in features came the following year with a 30-minute segment of *In Our Time* called *Desires* (*Qi-huang*). Yang's first full-blown feature was *That Day, on the Beach* (*Haitan de yitian*, 1983), a lushly photographed film recounting the relationship of two women through a complex structure of flashbacks within flashbacks. His second film, *Taipei Story* (*Qing-mei zhuma*, 1985), describes the world of a woman who must choose between a dead-end future

with her fiancé or a new career with a successful businesswoman. His cool, mannerly style in both films drew critical comparisons to Antonioni and Wenders by Western authors and foreshadowed the radical step he'd take in *The Terrorizer*. This style would also be the target of Taiwanese critics, who attacked him for being too indulgently Western.

Yang's relationship with the West is somewhat different than that of other New Taiwan Cinema directors. Formally, he owes everything to European political cinema and nothing to Taiwanese cinema save its slow pace. His characters and themes, however, are extremely specific to Taiwan and the problems it faces in its swift modernization. In *The Terrorizer*, Yang moves one step closer to (Western) modernist political cinema and, at the same time, so specifically addresses the problems of modern Taiwanese society that the Western viewer may have trouble appreciating the range of his critique.

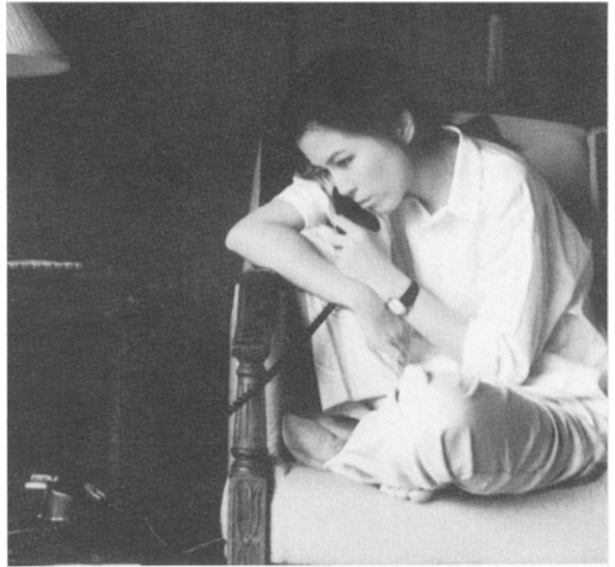
*The Terrorizer* is a reflexive film which intertwines three main plot strands containing at least ten characters. Yang constructs the film in such a way that the relationships between these characters unfold so slowly that the plot, as it were, remains hidden for most of the film. The first plot strand concerns a young photographer from an upperclass family who becomes obsessed with a Eurasian girl called "the White Chick." She is at the center of the second strand; the daughter of a prostitute and an American GI, she lives a life full of rebellious petty crime. In the main plot thread (primary by virtue of screen time and the film's single sympathetic character), a middleclass novelist, Chou Yü-fen, leaves her career-oriented husband because he can give her neither the love nor the baby she needs. She charts a new course for her life with a new career and an old boyfriend. Amid this diverse collection of characters representing every strata of Taiwanese urban society, the White Chick makes a prank phone call that sets off connections in every direction; the seemingly unrelated stories converge on a violent, terribly curious ending.

The roots of Yang's style reach to directly to Europe and political film after 1968. In a radical break from mainstream Taiwanese film, even that of the New Wave, Yang uses a cool, detached collage style whose intertwining stories initially defy cohesiveness, then intermin-

gle, and finally converge on a double ending. Nearly 20 minutes into the film, a reflexive shot through the viewfinder of the photographer's camera comments on this collage structure. The camera pans back and forth, randomly following pedestrians walking across an elevated walkway: are these characters related or is the director merely shooting whoever walks in front of his camera? Yang playfully cuts to the bored photographer whose camera dangles back and forth from its strap; perhaps it is random. In this game of connect-the-dots, Yang forces a reading of the film by the spectator. He compels his audience to consider the implications of this film by denying them normal cinematic pleasure, and in doing so risks losing both his audience and his career.

So Yang affords the spectator a different kind of pleasure: making the connections. By the end of *The Terrorizer*, Yang ties all the relationships together, some of which remain ambiguous until the final moments of the film. In fact, the shot on the walkway is reprised at this moment of complete convergence when the husband begins his vengeful killing spree: this time, the camera follows the husband (not a random pedestrian) across the catwalk in a straightahead pan. We no longer wonder who these characters are, the connections between them are finally clear. To use Barthes's language, the hermeneutic code is unusually rich in this film; its payoff comes from the resolution of our initial confusion.

This shot of the husband also reveals a further influence of European cinema on Yang in its reflexivity. The pedestrian bridge traverses "movie street" in downtown Taipei. Huge movie billboards spangle the background with color and, more than likely, most of Yang's first-run audience was sitting in one of the dark theaters below. There are many other self-reflexive scenes, including an argument between Chou and her husband in which both directly address the camera. On a more playful note, a delivery boy arrives in one scene with 50 sandwiches for the film crew only to be turned away by one of the characters: "Movies my ass," he mutters. Yang uses the reflexivity to remind the spectators they are watching a film, much the way Chou reminds her husband and lover that her novels are nothing more than fiction. Along with the collage structure, it creates a constant tension between emotional identification with

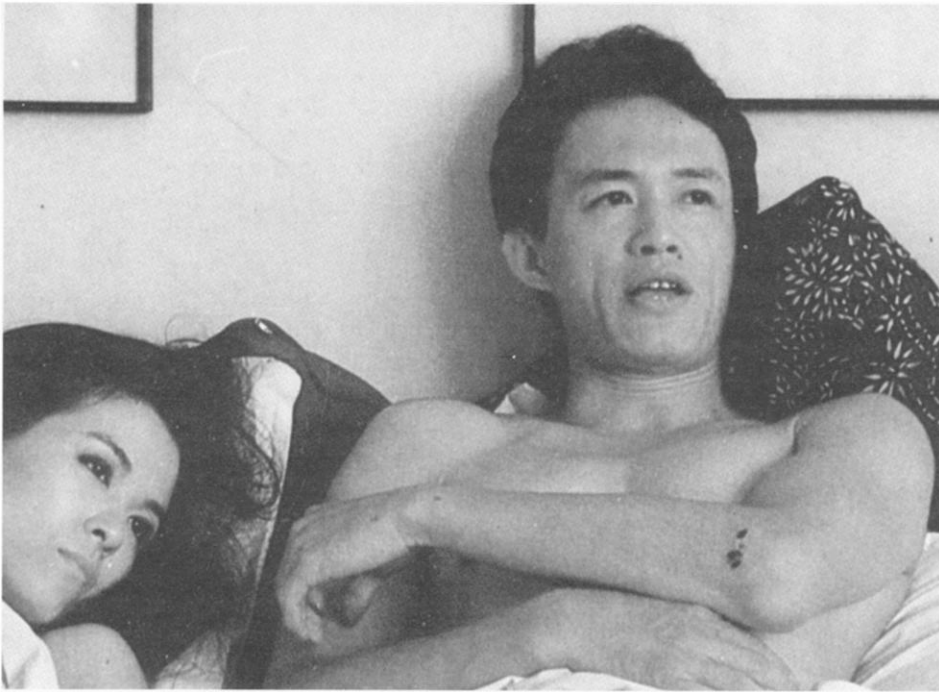


*The fatal phone call in THE TERRORIZER*

the film and reflexive reminders of its illusive nature.

The distance these two factors create allows for an even more interesting tension between intellectual connections among the collage segments and their perfectly rational explanation in the plot. For example, when the obsessed photographer leaves his girlfriend for the White Chick, he leaves a note saying that he'll never come back. The girlfriend reads it while a female voice-over reads aloud a suicide note. The next shot shows the girlfriend lying in a speeding ambulance as the suicide note continues on the sound track. Finally, Yang reveals the source of the suicidal voice-over by cutting to the White Chick, who's making a prank phone call. We initially assume the suicide note belongs to the girlfriend, then realize it's actually a nasty practical joke by the Eurasian woman she's lost her boyfriend to. Furthermore, it's the White Chick's prank phone call to Chou that initiates the connections which ultimately lead to physical violence. Yang inserts many layers of ironic intellectual connections between the narrative strands which allow him to bury the plot to the degree he has. The process of digging it up is one of active interpretation and, hopefully, self-examination.

Another way Yang forces interpretation is by creating a volatile off-screen space. Between most scenes, and sometimes between shots within a scene, Yang presents an empty frame into which the characters enter. Some of these shots are reminiscent of Ozu's "pillow shots"; the frame contains recognizable objects, but



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nothing relating directly to the story.<sup>4</sup> In an interesting variation of this, one transition shows a group of strangers milling around a street corner, creating an abstract pattern of movement. Suddenly, the camera pans with one man as he leaves the crowd and crosses the street, revealing the White Chick, who is apparently soliciting. Often these transition shots are truly empty, even out of focus; they lack signifiers of any kind.

Gimmicky as this sounds, Yang integrates this use of offscreen space neatly into his collage style in two ways. First, the offscreen space becomes capable of unleashing swift and unexpected violence. After training the spectator to expect the narrative to penetrate these empty spaces, Yang uses the accompanying element of surprise—who's going to enter and from where?—to make his scenes of violence all the more shocking. After the transition shot described above, the White Chick takes the man to a hotel where she rifles his wallet. He catches her and pulls out his belt to beat her. The scene is blocked with the man on the left and the White Chick on the right; his eyeline to the right confirms this. As he pulls out his belt, the White Chick suddenly jumps out from the left side of the frame and stabs him. Not only is the unexpected violence surprising, but it comes from *the wrong side* of the frame. One is never

sure what waits outside the limits of the camera's vision; it's a breach of trust between film-maker and spectator which Yang exploits fully in the film's violent ending.

Secondly, and more importantly, this creative use of space distances the spectator from easy identification and forces a reading of the film. As spectators scan the abstract patterns of this empty frame, waiting for a character to enter and resume the flow of the narrative, their minds search the offscreen space, wondering whose space it is, who will enter, and from where. At the same time, this forces the spectators to think paradigmatically, making those intellectual leaps between the spaces and narrative strands in spite of themselves. It's quite impossible to avoid an active reading of this film.

Such a reading is necessary, not only for such a decentralized, polycentric structure, but also for Yang's critique of Taiwanese society to hold the possibility of affecting attitudes and stimulating change. The form is entirely European, yet the film's target is culturally specific. Each character represents some facet of Taiwanese life and the film's collage reveals their interconnectedness, how one's selfish actions have repercussions throughout the spheres of family and society. Appropriately enough, Yang was inspired by Reinhard Hauff's concern for society's condition and the German director's dedi-

cation to affecting change through film. Referring to a visit to Hauff during the post-production of *Stammheim* (1986), Yang says, "There may not be Baader-Meinhof groups in this part of the world. But the bombs we planted deep within one another are ticking away. There may be something else we could do other than simply hoping they will never go off."<sup>5</sup>

These bombs do go off and the ending is the finest example of how the film both invites and demands interpretation. This genuinely surprising ending diverges wildly from the much more conventional dénouement set up by a controlling narrative, Chou's latest novel. The novel concerns a troubled marriage that ends tragically when a prank phone call leads the husband to suspect his wife of infidelity; the husband in the novel shoots his wife, then himself, in a jealous rage. As Yang slowly reveals the plot of the film, it begins to correspond to the events of Chou's novel. To strengthen the connection, characters who read her novel mistake its events for reality; they begin to act out its movement and she constantly reminds them that it's only a story. At the end of the film, Chou's husband reads the novel and begins a similar shooting spree. In a move reminiscent of Buñuel, Yang suddenly shifts the film back five minutes and presents an entirely different ending in which the husband kills only himself. Neither ending is a dream; rather, it's the natural outcome of the film's structure. By diverging from the controlling narrative of Chou's novel, Yang reminds us that it's only a film.

The characters who mistake Chou's writing for reality are all men, and they assume the roles of their alter egos with fatalistic abandon. Similarly, the spectator takes her writing just as literally, despite her warning that "it's only fiction, don't take it so seriously." The first ending follows our expectations as built up by the controlling narrative of the novel; the second is an indictment of such a passive reading. When the men read her work, they feel plagued by guilt and even explode in violence rather than change their lives. It's the women in the film who are flexible enough to meet the challenges of a fast-changing society and still work towards a meaningful existence. The men play their culturally set roles, unable or unwilling to adapt. It's for this reason that the final image is so compelling. Chou wakes up abruptly with

the gunshot that initiates the second ending. After the camera reveals her husband's body lying in a bathroom somewhere in Taipei, she sits up in bed, looking troubled, as if she knew he were dead. Her lover wakes up and asks if anything is wrong (he was murdered in the first ending). She suddenly throws up over the side of the bed in the final image of the film. This powerful intellectual montage suggests she's sick of all the selfish acts of "terrorism" between the characters, but then the mundane explanation sinks in: she's pregnant with the child her husband couldn't give her. Chou teeters on the brink between the old and the new; in a single convulsive action she vomits on the ugliness of the past and signals rebirth and possibility in a most sober sign of hope.

Yang Te-ch'ang also teeters on this edge. A recent poll of nine New Wave directors revealed that only one of them felt "New Taiwan Cinema" was still a valid term.<sup>6</sup> The lone dissenter was Yang Te-ch'ang. The future of their national cinema is as uncertain as ever, and this limbo is, to some extent, what makes Chinese cinema as a whole so fascinating. A place in history for film-makers like Ray, Kurosawa, and Oshima is assured, their contributions unquestionable. It's film-makers like Yang, however, who hold the potential to make Asian cinema in general, and Taiwanese in particular, not only as exciting as Western film, but also as important.

—MARKUS NORNES

#### NOTES

1. The sloppy transliteration of proper names reflects the lack of standardization, both in Chinese-speaking countries and the English-language press.
2. The sources for this brief history are primarily the author's interview with Fu Syou-ling (colleague of Yang Te-ch'ang), University of Southern California, 18 March 1988; Tony Rayns, "New Cinema in Taiwan," *Hawaii International Film Festival Viewer's Guide* (1987), 60-63; Derek Elley, "Taiwan," *International Film Guide* (1984), 295-298; *Ibid.*, "Taiwan," *International Film Guide* (1988), 328-333; Yvonne Yuan, "New Recipes for the Film Industry: Gourmet Fare for Moviegoers," *Free China Review*, XXXII/10 (Oct. 1982), 48-49.
3. Tony Rayns, "New Cinema in Taiwan," *Hawaii International Film Festival Viewer's Guide* (1987), 61.
4. Various critics have compared Ozu's use of non-narrative space to modernist cinema, which is rather odd considering he's generally considered the most traditionally Japanese director. Yang, on the other hand, is certainly reacting against traditional modes of filmic representation, and directly influenced by modernist film-making. Interestingly enough, in correspondence with the author, Yang attributes his appreciation of offscreen space to rigorous training in Chinese brush painting and calligraphy.
5. *AFI Fest Program Book* (Los Angeles, 1988), 45.
6. Derek Elley, "Taiwan," *International Film Guide* (1988), 333.