

Building, Feeling, and Understanding Violence:
Edward Yang's *A Brighter Summer Day*, *Taipei Story*, and *Terrorizers*

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There's a dead body in the street. It appears without spectacle or sentiment, embedded in the city—out in the open, witnessed by passersby, and absorbed into the noise of urbanity. This body comes from disparity: “a growing crack in the dull surface of everyday reality.”¹ Edward Yang's films, *A Brighter Summer Day* (1991), *Terrorizers* (1986), and *Taipei Story* (1985), all culminate in a moment of deathly violence, not as a means of narrative resolution, but an eruption of accumulated pressure from conflict. Across these films, Yang develops a visual and temporal language that communicates the slow, gradual building of violence—physical, social, and cultural—in a society shaped by dislocation, authoritarianism, modernization, and residual colonialism. Yang's Italian neorealist-inspired films use lingering shots, wide coverage, juxtaposing compositions, and organic surroundings to perform social analyses of the psychological weight of a nation in transition. In doing so, they fulfill one of the main purposes of art cinema: making sense of life.

I. Physical Violence

Besides its slow-paced, stationary aesthetics, Yang's epic coming-of-age crime drama *A Brighter Summer Day* depicts multiple outbursts of gang violence. Instead of the film's typical static shots, tracking shots are used to create scenes of chaos and elicit intensified emotions. Within the first ten minutes, a fight breaks out between the Little Park and 217 gangs.² Directly before, static shots show the inside of the night school classroom followed by boys pranking a classmate. The harmless, almost nostalgic scene is abruptly replaced by sheer chaos. The moving camera tracks laterally across the commotion, capturing two packs of gang members chasing each other up and down the school building's open-air hallways. The long tracking shots maintain an observational distance while still immersing the viewer in the disorder. The sequence

¹ Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (1972; repr., Oakland: Univ of California Press, 2018).

² *A Brighter Summer Day*, 00:09:30 to 00:13:38.

ends with Little Park leader Sly smashing a brick into the head of the 217's weakest member. A close-up showcases the boy's thin pale face as the rest of the frame is abandoned in darkness; blood gushes from his swollen mouth as he begs for his life. This choice evokes horror and demands sympathy. A smash cut brings us to Si'r's family dining room, when he quietly returns home to a bowl of warm noodles left for him.³ The static shot evokes Ozu's tatami shot, used to compose a calm domestic ambiance. This juxtaposition through editing accentuates the gap between the brutality of juvenile gang life and a seemingly orderly society under the rule of the authoritarian Kuomintang (KMT) government of the time.

Another particularly masterful sequence is the opening of *Terrorizers*, which introduces the film's multiple converging narratives.⁴ Shots of sleepless people half-lying in bed are intercut with jarring shots of a dead body in the middle of a street. As gunshots sound, life goes on as normal—we watch as a woman washes clothes on her balcony as shots fire below. The establishing shot of the film's central couple, Lizhong and Yufen is also narratively charged: in a single take, the camera starts on Yufen in bed, pans across a dividing wall, and into the next room where Lizhong is getting ready to leave for work—a spatial metaphor for their emotional disconnect. Then, it is back to the violence: in a wide shot, a hand holding a gun aims out of a window. We see the interior of the hideout apartment before the characters. Then, “White Chick” and a man with a heavy metal haircut jump out of the window, but the man is apprehended by two other men with handguns. Rather than following the scene of action with the gangsters, Yang chooses to focus on a close shot of water dripping out of a pipe. The sound of trickling water continues to be heard as White Chick limps away—signifying that in Yang's world, violence leaks slowly and inevitably into the foundation of the city.

³ *A Brighter Summer Day*, 00:13:38 to 00:14:08

⁴ *Terrorizers*, 00:00:00 to 00:08:49

The intercutting of three couples' morning routines establishes a narrative of the realistic urban living of ordinary people, echoing Italian neorealism's focus on the mundane. Lingering shots of indoor morning wakeup scenes of the two couples create feelings of unease and disparity, foreshadowing impending separation; repetitive shots of the anonymous body in the street appear to be postmodern. Only a man's failed attempt amidst repetitive gun blasts to rescue the body proves that the violence is real. The sequence unfolds in long takes across a shared temporal space, but time feels stretched—the sound of police sirens jumps in and out, reinforcing the slow-motion rhythm of institutional response. When the armed forces finally arrive and charge into the dilapidated building, the police chief takes off his sunglasses and yawns. This is his morning routine—dealing with violence in a city of malaise.

II. Violence in Social Context

A Brighter Summer Day is based on a real youth homicide that happened in Taipei in 1961. Yang was so impacted by the incident that he spent many years devotedly creating the film as a way to reflect on the case, which took place amidst an extremely complex social background. In a scene following Si'r and Ming's last date, they are at the house of Ma, the son of a powerful army general.⁵ Static, lingering shots of the Japanese-style sliding panels appear before characters enter and linger after they leave, evoking both admiration (of the elegance of the house) and suspension. Cat and another boy Airplane are cosplaying soldiers. Ming plays with a pistol and fires it at Si'r, thinking it was unloaded. The medium shot of Ming is eerie: she moves to the center of the frame, her mouth parted in a smile as she dangles the gun haphazardly in front of the viewer. When the shot is fired, we linger on Ming, not knowing if Si'r was hit. Behind the smoking gun, Ming's eyes go wide in shock. Cutting back to Si'r, he is unharmed but his lips turn white. While Si'r is frozen in shock, Ma rushes in and slaps Ming. In this scene,

⁵ *A Brighter Summer Day*, 03:13:27 to 03:14:24.

Yang uses architecture and mise-en-scène to historicize violence. Remnants of colonization and war live in the walls of these formerly military-occupied homes: guns, uniforms, and even a samurai sword. The architecture becomes a container of past and present violence—a liminal space that enables action, rendering violence as something only waiting to be triggered. Such haunted interiors and landscapes trace the memories of a director shaped by displacement. Born in Shanghai, Yang and his family were among those who fled to Taiwan in 1949 after the Kuomintang lost to the Communist Party. Coming of age during the White Terror, his youth was one marked by organized crime, corruption, and political suppression. With this historical context, Yang's reflection on the impact of neocolonialism and the lingering influence of Japan and America becomes clear.

To grasp the weight of Yang's cinema, it must be situated within Taiwan's historical context. After years of being a Japanese colony, upon Japan's defeat in World War II, Taiwan was turned over to the KMT government, which was fighting a civil war against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In 1949, the CCP won and the KMT had to move its government to Taiwan—an exodus of over one million mainland Chinese. The subsequent period of martial law is known as the White Terror: the Taiwanese native population was hostile to mainland immigration, and the KMT was deeply suspicious of the formerly Japanese colony—cemented by the KMT's brutal massacre of tens of thousands of Taiwanese during 1947's 228 incident. In 1987, martial law ended and Taiwan became a democratic state, undergoing spectacular economic development in the period of globalization.⁶

Yang, who almost became an architect, often uses structural landscapes in his films to recreate the physical social background on the big screen. *Taipei Story* starts out characteristically slow with distant shots of a couple (Chin and Lung) touring an apartment,

⁶ Andrew D. Morris, *Taiwan's History: An Introduction* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004).

almost all wide shots or medium shots. In the tradition of Bresson and Ozu, the camera lingers on the empty apartment even after actions are complete or characters leave the room—something Schrader calls “time-image-editing” or a break from “sensorimotor logic,” creating a sense of uneasiness for the viewer.⁷ After this, the spectatorial eye is drawn even more to modern architecture—glass facades, geometric structures, and office space—emphasizing the clinical modernity of Chin’s workplace. The ambient soundscape reinforces this: the clacking of keyboard typing, echoing hallways, and constant traffic. In one visually poignant scene, we get a wide shot of Chin and an architect in her firm walking through a massive atrium space, a largeness that consumes their tiny human figures. “Look at these buildings,” the architect says. “It’s getting harder for me to tell which ones I designed and which ones I didn’t. They all look the same. Whether I’m involved or not seems less and less important.”⁸ This line plainly reinforces the broader feeling of alienation that seeps through the film—a loss of individuality in a modernizing world of homogenizing structures.

The wide shot is again employed when Chin and her sister are on a rooftop. From the high-rise, the camera captures a city landscape of buildings, billboards, and traffic. Chin’s sister says, “It’s like you can see everyone from up here, but no one can see you.” This creates a stark sense of people being alienated from their urban surroundings, which are impersonal, cold, and distant. Through these wide shots, individuals appear small and inconsequential in a largely geometric environment. An extreme wide shot covers the concrete jungle separating the two human figures from nature—the mountain ranges looming in the distance all in one frame. Utilizing wideness, Yang masterfully portrays urban alienation, the conflict between man and environment, and the clash between traditional and new values.

⁷ Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 4.

⁸ *Taipei Story*, 00:07:06 to 00:08:16.

On the other hand, *A Brighter Summer Day* takes advantage of suburban, even rural settings. When Si'r and Ming meet in a military training field, an extreme wide shot establishes the open, desolate setting.⁹ Gunshots sound continuously in the distance while we hear Ming's question: "Why are you guys all afraid of the army?" Si'r and Ming are then shown in a static shot, but the camera follows Si'r as he rolls down a hill and plays dead as an answer to Ming's question. In the next wide shot, Si'r and Ming are talking but we can only hear the droning of an airplane and the clanging of the soldiers' weapons as they assemble into a line. The soldiers are shown in an exceptionally wide shot and the sound of an officer shouting orders is dampened by distance. Throughout, there is a vastness of negative space and, like in *Taipei Story*, the characters seem dwarfed by their surroundings. The presence of the armed soldiers in the distance also implies a dangerous sociopolitical environment in which teenagers like Si'r and Ming are helpless and vulnerable. This explains why many boys, feeling alienated, joined gangs to seek a sense of security and belonging, only to be engulfed in violence and death.

In Yang's cinema, the West is mostly represented through pop culture and music. For the most part, Yang forgoes the use of music to guide viewers and instead leverages natural noises to create reality, perhaps in the lineage of Bresson, who was "keenly aware of the emotional and editorial potential of music."¹⁰ That is why when Yang *does* employ music, it is meticulous and thematically charged. In *A Brighter Summer Day*, all the kids wear blue jeans and sneakers, but they live in Japanese houses. Their parents are partisans of the KMT, thus they belong to the China favored by America—growing up in a Taiwan shaped by foreign powers with an ambiguous cultural identity. The ballad "Are You Lonesome Tonight?", made famous by Elvis

⁹ *A Brighter Summer Day*, 00:36:23 to 00:39:37.

¹⁰ Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 96.

Presley in 1960, recurs throughout the film as a song beloved by Si'r's best friend, Cat.¹¹ The song serves as both a cultural artifact of the American neocolonial presence and a mirror for characters struggling with rejection and illusions of love, especially Si'r.

In *Terrorizers* and *Taipei Story*, music is used in scenes of Taipei's Westernized 80s nightlife. In *Taipei Story*, the musical background of Chin is Western, aligning her with the modern, global outlook. Similarly, in *Terrorizers*, a woman puts on a record, "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" by The Platters, and watches as her Eurasian daughter (White Chick) sleeps, potentially alluding to her past with an American soldier.¹² The scene is dimly lit and extremely blue-toned, invoking a strong nostalgia. The woman's heavy makeup, permed hairdo, and working-class accent imply her identity: she and her mixed-race daughter are likely outcasted in Taiwan's homogenous landscape. When she moves to caress her daughter, the daughter's face is completely shrouded in darkness—implicating she has been lost to a life of crime.

Beyond music, the West and Japan are prominent in Taipei's mise-en-scène. *Terrorizers* and *Taipei Story* take the time to linger on traffic and busy intersections, establishing a realistic urban setting but also expressing the city's restless inertia as a consequence of mass production and globalization. One *Taipei Story* scene between Chin and the young gang member unfolds in front of a glowing Fujifilm sign, while multiple other shots of the cityscape capture buildings adorned with the logos of NEC and Nippon Carbon. These point to the residual presence of Japanese colonialism, and Taiwan's postwar integration into global capitalism. Japan is always in the periphery and is seen as a symbol of a better life, especially by Chin's little sister. America functions similarly: a distant promise of reinvention. Chin and Lung speak continuously about

¹¹ Ben Ratliff, "From Elvis in Taipei," The Criterion Collection, April 10, 2020, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/6902-from-elvis-in-taipei?srltid=AfmBOor3IFb9VSjopcP8NEwT7AulMRYlqo0DNapgtc7cPvA8bOXUHnM>.

¹² *Terrorizers*, 00:22:11 to 00:25:02.

moving there, but this never materializes. Like their prospective marriage, the American dream only offers “the illusion that you can start over.”¹³

III. Violence Out of Cultural Clash

Violence in Yang’s cinema comes through conflicts of values, most evidently inscribed in his characters’ dialogue. Though his films tend to prioritize gesture and silence over speech, when his characters do speak, it often arrives as a pivotal confession or confrontation, frequently functioning to reveal the psychological and cultural power structures that dictate or destroy them. In *A Brighter Summer Day*, one particular scene in which Si’r confesses to Ming in front of a loud brass band combines the effects of music and dialogue. Above the noisy music, Si’r shouts, “Ming, don’t be afraid! You have to be brave! I’m with you. You needn’t be afraid!” The music peters out as he says, “I’ll protect you,” and swells again as Ming responds in exasperation, “I don’t need anyone’s help. No one can help anyway.” The noisiness of the band drowns out Si’r’s voice, just as his worldview fails to reach Ming.¹⁴ This conflict of values foreshadows Si’r’s eventual killing of Ming. Si’r holds traditional values regarding the way girls should behave, wanting Ming to be devoted and in need of saving. Ming, however, is a product of socioeconomic instability. Her father died in war and her mother works as a live-in maid, thus her relationships with multiple boys are less about promiscuity than survival. Under pressure, she seeks resources and stability, so love is not at the forefront. When Si’r realizes he cannot make her love him back, or mold her into his ideal, he kills her. “You’re hopeless! Shameless and hopeless!” he shouts as he stabs her. These words, said by Si’r’s own father when beating Si’r’s older brother, are an almost parental condemnation—a cycle of patriarchal violence. His words elucidate a deeper pathology of male entitlement, moral rigidity, and a society that offers little

¹³ *Taipei Story*, 01:42:43 to 01:43:45.

¹⁴ *A Brighter Summer Day*, 02:01:44 to 02:02:27.

space for emotional honesty. Ming represents a more modern, or perhaps just pragmatic, vision: “I’m like this world. This world will never change!”¹⁵ This value conflict underscores Taiwan’s shaky cultural foundation, where migrated values of Confucian morality collide with the imported individualism of the West, exposing the turmoil of a society suspended between traditional authority and modern disillusionment.

At the end of *Terrorizers*, dialogue betrays the protagonist’s desperate struggle between his values and cold reality. When Lizhong visits his police chief friend, he pretends he has gotten promoted at work. Over drinks, Lizhong proclaims the male ethos: the only thing that matters is career. If his wife leaves him, so be it—he still has his career. However, he has lost both and the irony is devastating. He is quite a traditional figure, doing everything in his power to provide for his wife Yufen. Still, again, there is a clash of values. Yufen is a writer, yet Lizhong pays little mind to her stories. In contrast, Yufen’s lover appreciates her art, thus she turns to him. Lizhong prioritizes his “masculine” achievements, thinking a promotion and increased material wealth will make his wife happy, but fails to acknowledge her need to fulfill herself as an artist. This conflict leads to Yufen leaving him, of course influenced also by White Chick’s prank call. Yang then concocts a fantasy ending where Lizhong goes on a killing spree, getting revenge on his boss and his wife’s lover. However, this is subverted into quiet suicide. The camera exposes the tragic truth through several long, static shots of Lizhong’s death from different angles: the gun on the ground, blood splattered on the white wall, his head against the bathtub, and blood seeping into the water.¹⁶ Once again, the image and trickling sound of water appears, and a slow Chinese ballad is playing. Through the lens of harsh realism, Yang elicits compassion from viewers—empathy for a passive man who has lost it all.

¹⁵ *A Brighter Summer Day*, 03:42:10 to 03:45:25.

¹⁶ *Terrorizers*, 01:45:57 to 01:46:36.

Taipei Story stages a more obvious clash of values, staging Lung (a man trapped in his bad habits) as the past and Chin (a woman pursuing an ambitious career) as the future. One bar scene features Lung and another man in a game of darts. The camera stays on Lung as he frustratingly flings the darts: we don't see where they end up, but his opponent tells us they are "way off." The bar starts playing Michael Jackson's "Baby Be Mine" and Lung shoves the other man—another moment intermingling American music with physical violence. The fight is shot uncharacteristically close to the characters and is a rare instance of handheld camerawork in Yang's cinema, moving with the frenzy of the scuffle.¹⁷ This interaction frames Lung as someone easily emasculated, still preoccupied with the glory of winning in his little league baseball days. Then, like in *A Brighter Summer Day*, we smash cut to a quiet static shot of Lung and Chin going back to their apartment. After this turmoil, Lung suggests they move to America, a form of escapism. Lung's propensity for violence signals his unwillingness to adapt to changes in life, externalizing the conflict between traditional and modern lifestyles.

¹⁷ *Taipei Story*, 00:50:35 to 00:52:40.

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