

A Fragmented Reality: Taiwan Behind Glass

Amy Cass

In a Tortoiseshell: *In her East Asian Studies essay on the Taiwanese film Terrorizer, Amy Cass uses **close looking** techniques to **analyze** how the film presents photography as a way of seeing and understanding urban reality. Amy uses her engagement with the visuals of the film through careful **close looking** to provide the **evidence** for her arguments, which stretch beyond description of the film and into bold, **motivated** claims.*

Excerpt

Yang furthers the idea of continuity between image and reality by presenting photography as a parallel to the modern urban experience of “fragmented seeing” mediated by windows. The use of windows in Yang’s shots fragment his characters and urban settings to create a set of images that appear like the photographs within the film. Towards the beginning of the film, a series of shots shows the hospital where male protagonist Lee Lizhong works. In each of these shots, the hospital interior appears through rows of windows (image 5). The rows of windows divide the hospital interior into a set of rectangular images that resemble the individual shots in a roll of film. Like a film roll, these smaller window images act as fragments that together make up a larger rectangular picture of life within the hospital. This presentation of windows as fragments of a larger image is similar to the presentation of photographs later in the film. When the young photographer displays his image of White Chick on the wall, he breaks the photograph up into fragments to increase its size (image 6). The pieces of the photograph hang separately on the wall, blowing independently in the wind. Just as each window segment reveals a portion of the greater hospital interior, each piece of paper contains a small part of the girl’s face. However, in the case of both windows and photographs, the entire image is still just a fragment of reality—the whole set of windows takes up just part of the hospital exterior and the photograph captures just a sliver of the entire scene from the film’s opening. Windows and photographs are merely fragments of

fragments. As a means for viewing Taipei, windows appear just as incomplete as photography, suggesting that the image behind a pane of glass is no more genuine than that in a photograph or by extension a film still. Yang's representation of windows and photographs as mere fragments of an unattainable whole is self-referential, as it illuminates the parallel status of his own cinematographic lens as a mode of seeing in mere fragments. However, film's status as an incomplete mode of seeing does not make it an incompetent one. The characters in *Terrorizer* spend a majority of the film looking out from or appearing behind glass; they experience their urban world in fragments. Therefore, the fragmented nature of film makes it uniquely suited to depict Taipei, as it aligns with the urban experience of seeing.

Yang further utilizes visual media within *Terrorizer* to present the distinctly urban experience of being simultaneously the viewer and the viewed as evidence for a greater loss of control and agency in the modern world. In one scene, the film again adopts the perspective of the young photographer as he follows pedestrians with his camera, panning back and forth to the intermittent sound of shutter clicks. Here the camera's focus seems arbitrary, switching between pedestrians for no apparent reason. Film scholar Markus Nornes notes that Yang reinforces this sense of randomness by cutting to an image of the camera dangling precariously from the neck of the bored-looking photographer. Nornes suggests that the seemingly random focus on pedestrians parallels Yang's own seemingly random focus on disparate storylines in the film. Conflating filmmaker and photographer, Nornes asks, "are these characters related or is the director merely shooting whoever walks in front of his camera?" (45). This idea of "shooting whoever walks in front" of a camera raises interesting questions about the power of visual media to view another person without their consent. This type of viewership is implicit in the typical third-party observer perspective assumed in both photography and film. Notably, the most significant photograph in the film—that of White Chick's face from the opening crime scene—is taken without the subject's consent. When White Chick later sees her own image blown up on the

photographer's wall she faints out of shock. In his essay on *Terrorizer*, Fredric Jameson describes this newly urban horror:

The experience is as simple as it is unsettling: others have been seeing me without my knowing it! Others whose existences I was not even aware of have been thinking about me! At the level of urban simultaneities on which we now find ourselves, this—what are you doing with my picture?—is a virtual cognito, the punctual other end of all those mutually exclusive synchronicities. (144)

The scene of the photographer taking photos of pedestrians illustrates the ease with which one's image can fall into the possession of another. The randomness that seems to characterize the young photographer's practice adds to this modern terror by stripping away any sense of control over the production of images. The scene points to the consequences of visual media that extend the power of the viewer while simultaneously increasing vulnerability to viewership. In this sense, cameras merely build upon the existing experience of urban spectatorship. Mediated by windows, the urban viewing position is necessarily that of both viewer and viewed, as the glass allows city dwellers to both see and be seen. In the urban landscape of Yang's Taipei everyone becomes simultaneously viewer and viewed. Taking photos of unsuspecting pedestrians, the young photographer seems secure in his viewership; but, little does he know that he too has become a subject of Yang's photographic gaze. As unknown film viewers watch him onscreen, the photographer too loses any control over his own image.

Film Stills Cited

Image 5:



Image 6:



Author Commentary

Amy Cass

This excerpt is from an essay I wrote on Edward Yang's film *Terrorizer* for my Chinese Cinema class. For this essay, Professor Huang asked us to analyze one of the films from our unit on Taiwan; she advised us to focus on a non-narrative aspect of the work and to explore what it tells us about post-Cold-War Taiwan. I selected the film *Terrorizer* for its use of photography, as I was interested in the metafictional implications of this choice.

Throughout the semester we were assigned weekly film journals. Professor Huang gave us specific prompts each week which pointed to a certain theme or stylistic choice that we should discuss by looking closely at one or two scenes from the film. The emphasis in these journal entries was always on non-narrative elements of the films—sound, costumes, mise en scene, camerawork, etc. These film journal assignments, along with Professor Huang's in-class analysis of the films, changed the way I watched films over the course of the semester. I became more and more attentive to repeated images, sounds, or shot angles throughout the film, pausing to record each instance they appeared. When I decided to write my paper on *Terrorizer* I looked back at these notes and my journal entry for that week to refine my focus, creating a list of the key scenes involving windows and photography.

The excerpt featured above includes the very first sections I wrote, featuring the two images from the list that most stood out to me: the shots of the hospital exterior windows and the blown-up picture of White Chick's face on the photographer's wall. For me, these two images best illustrated the connection I was trying to identify between reality, photography, and ultimately film as a fragmented mode of seeing. By isolating these images as screenshots, it became easier to analyze the film as a visual medium rather than as a story or even as cinematography. When I am trying to start writing a paper, I often get caught up in developing my argument and creating a clear structure. While this type of planning is important, I have found that it is often better for me to just start writing by analyzing my primary sources and then build an argument from there. This was the strategy I employed for this paper, starting with a "close looking" of specific shots. I homed in on these images as if they were paintings or photographs on their own, analyzing the composition and framing in relation to one another. This analysis set up the connection between windows and photography—between reality and image—and from there I was able to build a more complex argument concerning the greater significance of a reality that is mere imitation, endlessly repeating images, in the context of modern Taiwan.

Editor Commentary

Paige Allen

Particularly when writing essays in the humanities, students often employ the skill of close reading: carefully picking apart a text to better understand its content (what the author is saying), its form (how the author says it), and the interaction between these two elements. Many University students struggle with fully translating those skills to film, resorting to analyzing the plot and the script without considering the visuals of the media. Amy does a wonderful job of “close looking”—analyzing the visual aspects of film as one might close-read a poem—in her essay, “A Fragmented Reality: Taiwan Behind Glass.” Her careful attention to visual details and techniques such as shot composition allows her to construct a strong argument about how *Terrorizer* reflects a fragmented, urban reality. If Amy had only analyzed the text of the film, her argument, which is so rooted in the act of seeing, would have fallen short.

In the first paragraph of this excerpt, Amy cleverly relates the shots of the hospital windows to a roll of film, arguing that the filmmakers intentionally draw a connection between the fragmented images of film and the fragmented experience of the urban world through windows. Importantly, Amy does not stop with her initial close looking. She uses what she has discovered through “close looking” to draw comparisons between scenes and extend her argument into a broader statement about the filmmakers’ intentions.

In the second paragraph of this excerpt, Amy carefully considers the way photography is depicted in the film to make her argument about urban viewership and consent. Amy combines her close analysis of the scene (the way the photographer captures images arbitrarily) with commentary from one of the filmmakers to strengthen her argument before incorporating the secondary source material by Frederic Jameson. By laying the foundation of her argument with careful close looking, Amy has the strong evidence to back up her claims, which reach beyond the details of the film and into metacinema.

Works Cited

Jameson, Frederic. "Remapping Taipei." *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*, Indiana University Press, 1995, pp. 114–57.

Nornes, Markus. "The Terrorizer." *Film Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 3, 1989, pp. 43–47. *JSTOR*, doi:0.2307/1212603. Accessed 8 April 2020.

Terrorizer. Directed by Edward Yang, Central Motion Pictures, 1986.

Bios

Amy Cass '20 is a senior at Princeton concentrating in History of Science. She is currently working on her thesis, which looks at the role of religion in the development of scientific naturalism in Victorian Britain through the work of physiologist William Benjamin Carpenter. Outside of academics, Amy is very involved in the dance community on campus as a member of two student companies. She wrote this paper as a senior.

Paige Allen '21 is a junior in the English Department from Mountain Top, Pennsylvania, pursuing certificates in Theater, Music Theater, Humanistic Studies, and Creative Writing. Her research interests include Gothicism and otherized bodies and minds, particularly in nineteenth-century literature and culture. She is the president of Princeton University Players, an editor for *The Daily Princetonian*, an Orange Key tour guide, an LCA Peer Arts Advisor, and a student intern with The Wesley Foundation. She is also a member of the Edwards Collective and the Behrman Undergraduate Society of Fellows. She wrote this as a junior.