

**Working Through the Ambiguities of Focalization
with the Films of Edward Yang**

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Abstract

This thesis is an evaluation of the extent to which theories of focalization are useful for the analysis of point of view in film. In it, I apply the small number of focalization models advanced within film studies to an analysis of the works of an internationally acclaimed Taiwanese director, Edward Yang. I reveal that Yang's films serve well to demonstrate how the conventional typologies of external and internal focalization are convenient labels that mask the considerable degree of ambiguity that is reflected by processes of focalization and narration in many films. Furthermore, I illustrate how an application of the alternative theory of auto-focalization to film analysis can generally free us from the limitations of these typologies, by drawing our attention to the iconic implications of film imagery. Finally, I determine that both models of focalization are largely useful for highlighting the degree to which the functions of character-focalizers and narrators can be indistinguishable, particularly in self-reflexive films.

Résumé

Cette thèse est une évaluation de l'efficacité des théories de focalisation pour l'analyse de cinéma point-de-vue. Avec l'aide de quelques modèles de focalisation cinématographique, nous analysons l'œuvre de Edward Yang, un réalisateur de réputation mondiale. Nous cherchons à relever comment les films de Yang montrent la manière que les typologies de focalisation externe et interne peuvent fonctionner comme des étiquettes convenables qui cache une ambiguïté qui se trouve dans les procès de focalisation et narration dans plusieurs films. Par ailleurs, en attirant l'attention sur les implications iconiques de l'image, nous mettons comment l'application d'une théorie alternative de l'auto-focalisation pourrait nous libérer de tous les typologies de focalisation. Enfin, nous concluons que les deux modèles de focalisation peuvent démontrer comment les focalisateurs de personnages et les narrateurs se mêlent, en particulier dans les films auto-reflexifs.

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Chapter I: Working Through the Ambiguities of Focalization with the Films of Edward Yang

1. An Introduction to an Unconventional Film Maker and an Innovative Theory

In comparison to the vast majority of mainstream films of the contemporary era, particularly those that have originated from Hollywood, it would not be an exaggeration to claim that Edward Yang's contributions to Taiwanese (and global) cinema are markedly unconventional in terms of their presentation of narrative structures and cinematographic styles. Unlike many of the commercially oriented pictures that are produced by many Hollywood film makers and studios, the plot lines of this director/screen-writer's films do not follow a formulaic structure, nor can his characters be described as archetypal, simple or one-sided. Furthermore, since all of his works fall squarely under the genre heading of drama, it should come as no surprise that they do not contain any of the gimmicks, such as elaborate special effects or fighting sequences, which are characteristic of so many standard action, war, fantasy, horror and science fiction films. Even in comparison to most mainstream Hollywood dramas, his films reflect a strong deviation from the norm, particularly in their willingness to close in a markedly ambiguous manner whereby the problems and struggles of the protagonists remain largely unresolved and the audience is left with a series of pressing questions regarding the post-filmic future of these figures. In other words, Yang's works certainly do not conform to the tendency of many Hollywood films, "...to display a strong degree of closure at the end...[by] seek[ing] to complete their causal chains with a final effect."¹

In part, what is unusual about Yang's approach to film making is the way in which he weaves together a complex series of seemingly divergent story lines into a cohesive narrative unit that is fairly realistic, unpredictable and thought provoking. In his analysis of Yang's film *The Terrorizer* (1986), the renowned cultural critic Fredric Jameson eloquently described the structure of that film as a set of, "unique temporal

¹ David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 6th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 77.

overlaps that reach their climax at the end of the film, like vibrations separated from each other in time that gradually become simultaneous.”² Indeed, such an observation could also apply to many of this director’s later films including *A Confucian Confusion* (1994), *Mahjong* (1995) and *Yi Yi* (2000). Because Yang’s pictures often follow this complicated pattern of story telling, it would not be an overstatement to suggest that the task of analysing his works is rather arduous and problematic, so much so that British film critic Tony Rayns once commented that Yang’s, “...fiction is unusually dense, to the extent that it almost resists synopsis.”³ Furthermore, Yang’s films consistently suggest a rich patchwork of parallel themes that are manifested self-reflexively not only within character actions and dialogues, but through the technical elements of camera work and *mise-en-scene*, both of which provide subtle, yet important clues that nuance our understanding of the protagonists’ personalities, sentiments, shortcomings and crises. On the surface, the thematic content of Yang’s work is focused on the deep rooted political, social, cultural and moral problems that he attributes to contemporary Taiwan and, for that matter, the rest of the globalized world, but underneath all of these issues, lies a principal interest in exploring human behaviour and relationships, particularly in terms of people’s propensity towards selfishness, narcissism, narrow mindedness and self-denial when interacting with one another.

On the whole, Yang’s pervasive interest in exploring the realms of human drama, consciousness and inter-subjectivity is reflected by several aspects of his technical approach to film making, particularly in terms of the different methods that he manipulates to bring us closer to the hearts and minds of his characters. One striking feature of his work lies in its cinematographic style, which arguably has a major impact on our ability to gain access to the subjective experiences of his protagonists – unlike in many of the mainstream films and television shows that have been produced in Hollywood in recent years, Yang’s productions do not involve a great degree of complex editing as they do not contain a high number of quick cuts, fades, dissolves, wipes or

² Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (London: BFI Publishing, 1992), 133.

³ Tony Rayns, “The Position of Women in New Chinese Cinema,” in *Cinema and Cultural Identity*, ed. Wimal Dissanayake (New York: University Press of America, 1988), 193.

similar techniques.⁴ For the most part, in films such as *A Confucian Confusion* and *Yi Yi* the application of the camera consistently conforms to two distinct patterns: in a given scene, it either remains largely static in one fixed position or it follows the movements of characters through tracking shots. Furthermore, Yang does not employ the use of zooms nor does he use unconventional lenses (e.g. wide-angle lenses) to augment the atmosphere and impact of a particular scene. Finally, he frequently uses the camera to capture scenes from a vantage point that is extremely distant from the action or dialogue and, therefore, we often feel a strong degree of spatial separation from the main characters.

However, our ability to achieve greater insight on the thoughts and emotions of his characters is also dependent on many of the visual elements that are contained within the various scenes that are captured by the camera, all of which belong to the distinct category of *mise-en-scene*: this includes the elements of lighting, set decoration, costumes, props and the placement of actors, all of which are intrinsic parts of any film scene. Aside from these factors, we could also consider camera framing and positioning as well as the sound environment (only within the story world) in defining this concept.⁵ In some cases, the positioning, movement and behaviour of the actors are crucial to enhancing our knowledge of the characters, particularly when they imply important

⁴ While the opening of this paper has certainly advanced a wide variety of damning criticisms towards what has been summed up reducibly as “mainstream Hollywood film,” I would like to point out that even some directors of big-budget, commercial films have also produced innovative works that are arguably successful in challenging preexisting conventions – for example, Christopher Nolan’s psychological mind-bender *Memento* (2000), Spike Jonez’s neurotic comedy *Adaptation* (2002) and Michel Gondry’s surrealistic drama *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) all reflect fairly radical approaches to film production and style. Nonetheless, if we were to consider that *Yi Yi* had won the Cannes Best Picture award (2000) shortly before the release of formulaic sequels such as *American Pie 2* and *Scary Movie 2* in 2001, Yang’s works would certainly stand out as markedly fresh and unconventional.

⁵ Bruce Kawin, *How Movies Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 97-98. *Mise-en-scene* is also commonly known as the *composition of the frame*.

information through subtle modes of facial expression and body language. In other cases, specific props might represent a certain personality trait, psychological predisposition or emotional condition that we are encouraged to associate, albeit implicitly, with a character's persona and state of mind. In addition, the use of lighting and colour can be manipulated in such a way as to suggest a particular mood that might compliment and emphasize that which is presumably held by the featured character(s). Aside from all of this, many of the scenes in Yang's films often reflect a tendency to play with spatial relations by allowing objects to obstruct the visual field between the characters and the camera, or by instructing actors to move in and out of the camera frame, thereby effecting the extent to which the film space appears to be limited or delimited. This approach to the construction and manipulation of space can also have an important impact on either expanding or restricting our knowledge of the subjective experiences that are attached to the protagonists.

In fact, all of these elements of cinematographic style and mise-en-scene influence the distinct patterns of character *focalization* that are predominant in his films; or, in other words, these alter the degrees to which the audience is able to gain insight on the perceptual, emotional and psychological states of his characters. In literary studies, the term focalization was pioneered by Gerard Genette to distinguish between those who "speak" and those who "see;" or, in other words, between those who function as narrators by telling a story and those who function as characters by inhabiting, perceiving and experiencing the story world. However, the rather unique approaches that Yang and his crew members take towards camera work, editing and mise-en-scene, often blur the lines between what Mieke Bal, Celestino Deleyto and other theorists have called *external* and *internal focalization*, terms of which were intended to account for two supposedly different forms of focalization. In essence, external focalization refers to the capability of a narrator to perceive the characters, objects and events of a story world from a time and space that is external to that of the story world itself. Because this supposed act of perception originates from a source (i.e. a narrator) that exists separately from the realm that is occupied by the characters themselves, such an act should be regarded as occurring in a strictly figurative sense. This seems quite evident if we consider that, in literature, a third-person narrator, by default, represents a source of commentary that is completely detached from the time and space of a story world, while a first-person narrator is merely

capable of recalling the events of his/her past experiences and, therefore, no longer occupies a realm that bears the same temporal and spatial order that is attributed to the (past) story world that he/she is describing. As a result, we must acknowledge that sources of narration are incapable of literally perceiving the figures and actions of a story, at least, in terms of “real-time” perception.

However, the technology of film, most notably the camera and sound recording devices, allows for the “real-time” presentation of the sights and sounds that constitute a film’s story world and, as such, we, as spectators, are able to perceive, almost instantaneously, the visual and aural tapestry that unfolds within its environment. As such, the camera and sound equipment serve as exclusive vehicles for the external focalization of the action of a given story world – obviously, the technological devices that are used to record a film could not be regarded as components of its story world, at least, in the vast majority of cases. As will be demonstrated later, the camera has traditionally been regarded, within film studies, as the highest, if not the only, source of narration that is available in cinema. If this were true, then acts of narration would be equivalent to acts of external focalization in film and, therefore, using focalization theory as a means to distinguish between those who “speak” and those who “see” in film narratives (and possibly other narrative mediums) would be extremely problematic and perhaps even pointless. However, much of this problem is tied into: first, the inherent ambiguity that is implied by an application of the external-internal typologies of focalization to the analysis of many film narratives; and second, the fallacious assumption that the camera serves as the exclusive source of narration in film, as, without a doubt, other variables, most notably elements of *mise-en-scene*, are also crucial to our understanding of processes of narration in cinema – we will explore all of these issues in much greater detail in the following sections of this chapter as well as the case studies presented in Chapter II.

Meanwhile, internal focalization describes moments when the events and objects of a story appear to be presented literally through the perceptual faculties of a given character, an observation of which has led some narratologists to conclude, albeit not always with the utmost of confidence, that characters themselves can temporarily serve as sources of narration whenever such instances occur. In other words, internal focalization takes place when the text of a narrative appears to present, for example, the objects that

are contained exclusively within the visual field of a character as if we, the audience, were able to see through his/her own eyes and were, therefore, granted with a form of perceptual privilege into his/her realm of subjective experience. In cinema, the camera can, for example, occupy the proximate position that is occupied by a character's visual point of view and, in turn, the narration of a film can appear to be guided exclusively by his/her perceptual fields particularly because the enveloping position that was once occupied by the camera as an external focalizer, one that had originally presented perspectives that were detached from those of the characters, becomes completely absent in such instances.

Aside from these aspects of focalization, Mieke Bal, who has arguably engaged in the most rigorous of efforts to apply focalization to narrative studies, has greatly expanded upon the theory, in part, by establishing her notion of *embedded focalization* which argues, in essence, that all narratives, regardless of the particular medium, exhibit multiple levels of focalization that exist simultaneously (i.e. *simultaneous focalization*) within a hierarchical chain of inter-dependent subject to object relationships that can originate from both characters and narrators. Thus, according to Bal, internal focalizers (i.e. characters) are capable of focalizing each other, while simultaneously being externally focalized by a higher source of narration, the latter of which, as previously mentioned, could not exist within the "here and now" that is occupied by the characters themselves, as paradoxical as such a claim might sound. Bal went on to argue that the simultaneity of embedded levels of focalization indicates that focalization is often extremely ambiguous (i.e. *ambiguous focalization*) and, as such, it is often difficult to distinguish clearly between the viewpoints that are held by focalizers – numerous examples of this dimension of focalization will be explored in the case studies presented in Chapter II. Thus, the task of determining exactly whose field of perception is being presented at particular moments in stories can be extremely problematic, if not impossible, and such an obstacle can, by extension, even confound our ability to differentiate between characters and narrators.⁶

⁶ To my knowledge, Bal first takes up a comprehensive treatment of focalization in *Narratologie: essais sur la signification narrative dans quatre romans modernes* (1977) and then provides an exhaustive expansion of her model in *De theorie van*

Bearing these general definitions of terminology in mind, we may now return to the primary focus of this thesis which centres greatly on the limitations of the external-internal typologies of focalization, particularly in the films of Edward Yang. As Deleyto has admitted in his application of focalization theory to film studies, the flexibility in narrative construction that is afforded to film makers by the sophisticated and diverse technology of the cinematic medium, has considerably blurred the lines between levels of external and internal focalization, a condition of which seems to represent one major aspect of Bal's notions of simultaneous focalization and ambiguous focalization. As a result, the implications of the external and internal sub-distinctions have been thrust into a state of extreme ambiguity, so much so that one might rightfully question the purpose of maintaining such distinctions at all. In parallel to this, the ambiguous status of focalization in Yang's films often points to broader implications that seem to undermine our ability to differentiate between narrators and characters; or sources of narration and focalization. In fact, Yang's approach to character focalization could indicate that there is indeed more than just one narrator in each of his films and this, by extension, begs the viewer to question exactly who is narrating his stories at any given moment. Moreover, an analysis of character focalization in the works of this director might also reveal how there are often intimate connections that exist between the portrayal of his characters' subjective experiences and the broader thematic content of his films.

Hence, the following thesis will analyse numerous scenes from Yang's films *A Confucian Confusion* and *Yi Yi* in order to illuminate the methods that he uses to achieve various levels and forms of character focalization. In doing so, it will be demonstrated that the external-internal typologies of focalization become extremely problematic due to many aspects of the film maker's approach to technique, style and narrative construction.⁷ We will also discuss several other theories on point of view and

vertellen en verhalen (1980), translated later as *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (1985). Meanwhile, Deleyto deals with the subject exclusively in relation to film studies in his article "Focalisation in Film Narrative" in 1992.

⁷ By using phrases such as "the film maker's approach," I do not intend to give my readers the impression that Yang is the only creative force that lies behind the production of his films. After all, most directors must depend on the contributions of

subjectivity in cinema in order to see if there are alternative models that might dispel some of the ambiguity that is generated by the traditional focalization typologies. Although it would be fascinating to examine reflections of character focalization in other films by Yang, unfortunately, such a task would go well beyond the scope of this thesis and, regardless, I believe that these films not only represent some of his best work, but, more importantly, serve remarkably well to call issues of character focalization into question. For now, just take into consideration that this director's films share far more similarities than differences, especially in terms of their technical style, plot development, and thematic content. Regardless, references to some of his other productions, namely *The Terrorizer* and *Mahjong*, will also be included in order to highlight the major commonalities between his productions. Ultimately, it will be shown that his manipulation of certain aspects of camera movement, framing, and, perhaps most importantly, mise-en-scene used in tandem with the acting talents of his performers is crucial in providing his audience with a heightened degree of insight on the inner workings of his characters' minds. However, it will also be demonstrated that, in many cases, these techniques are manipulated in such a way as to produce a predominant sense of ambiguous focalization whereby the lines between internal and external sources of information (i.e. internal or external because they do or do not appear to be manifested by an agent who inhabits the world of a story) become markedly indistinguishable.

At this time, I would like to clarify a number of important issues to my readers. The concept of focalization, within the focus of this investigation, represents a tool of analysis that has recently been adopted, albeit without controversy, within the field of narratology – that is the study of narrative components and modes of narration, and how both of these are manifested within the structure of texts across all mediums, including literature, poetry, film, television or even the visual arts. That said, theories of focalization had originally blossomed within the study of literature as an attempt to work

other crew members, particularly those of cinematographers, editors, sound engineers and art directors. In addition, Yang usually works with the same people on most of his productions, including his editor Chen Bowen and sound engineer Du Duzhi – surely, Yang has chosen to work with these people on a fairly consistent basis due to the quality of their work and input.

through the limitations posed by the traditional notions of *point of view* that had become so entrenched within literary analysis from the early to late 20th century. When the narratologists Genette and Bal pioneered their models of focalization, some of their counterparts reacted positively with a great deal of interest and enthusiasm,⁸ while others engaged in diligent efforts to identify the various shortcomings that they came to attribute to these supposedly ground breaking efforts.⁹ This disagreement and controversy, in turn, resulted in the production of numerous works that attempted to sift through the potential advantages and disadvantages that were reflected in the implications of the new theories, but exclusively in relation to literature, with the exception of a handful of studies that will be mentioned shortly. By comparison, concepts of focalization have seldom been considered in relation to the medium of film, despite the assumption amongst most thinkers that narratological theories should be applicable to all textual mediums.

As such, the principal concern of this thesis is to determine the degrees to which theories of focalization are (and are not) applicable to the cinematic medium, especially in relation to the external-internal sub-distinctions of the terminology. Tied into this broad interest is a series of more specific questions – most notably in relation to narration - that will be outlined in the following section. In order to explore these issues, we will, first, refer to the small number of works that have been advanced on focalization in film in the remaining sections of this chapter. Following this, we will apply the perspectives of these studies to an in depth analysis of *A Confucian Confusion* and *Yi Yi* in Chapter II. Finally, we will explore some of the broader conclusions that might emerge from this analysis in Chapter III. I have selected the works of this film maker, specifically, because I believe that these serve well to both validate and problematize various elements of

⁸ Genette pioneered the application of focalization to literature in his article “Stendhal” (1969) reprinted in *Figures II* in 1972. However, his most exhaustive treatments of the subject can be found in *Narrative Discourse* (1980) and *Narrative Discourse Revisited* (1983).

⁹ For examples of supportive approaches towards an application of focalization to literary studies, consult the works of Rimmon-Kenan, Erickson, Viswanathan, and Ifri. For examples of critical approaches, see the works of Bronzwaer, Edmiston, Chatman, Nelles and Jahn.

focalization theory, and much of this is indeed related to the fairly novel and innovative style of this film maker. Nonetheless, this paper will represent, first and foremost, an assessment of focalization theory in Yang's films, rather than a general evaluation of, for example, the artistic merit, style and novelty of this director's work. Consequently, the locus of any forthcoming discussions on the modes of characterization, plot development and thematization in his films, as well as the various techniques that are deployed to fuel these processes, will be centred principally on the issue of focalization.

That aside, investigating this director's films could yield fruitful results by advancing both our understanding of contemporary film narratives and our knowledge of Taiwanese culture, society and identity in the present era, subjects of which are of great interest to me as a scholar of Taiwan and China studies. However, the films of Edward Yang, especially those produced since the early 1990s, also refer to issues of modernity, politics, culture, commercialism and morality that extend well beyond the local context of Taiwan and, therefore, they reflect a number of markedly cosmopolitan or international concerns. This is hardly surprising in light of the colourful historical background of this director's life – he has spent a great deal of time living, working and travelling in various countries, most notably Taiwan, China and the United States. There is no doubt that this rather worldly background has inspired him to consider various issues that are not so much unique to Taiwan, but are, in actuality, reflections of a global experience. In light of this, an analysis of his cinematic works would not only yield insight on the cultural milieu of present day Taiwan, but on that of much of the contemporary world as well.

However, I do not want to give my readers the impression that Edward Yang represents “the end all, be all” of cinematic innovation, as a variety of his contemporaries, both within and without Taiwan, have also made important contributions to the medium of film. While he may be considered as one of the pioneers and founding fathers of the so-called New Wave Generation of Taiwanese film makers, it should be acknowledged that he stood along side other innovative film makers and screenwriters, namely Hou Hsiao-hsien and Wu Nian-jen, in establishing this movement. Not surprisingly, many of the works produced by these film makers have shared a number of striking similarities, particularly in terms of their cinematographic style, sense of pacing, and thematic content. In general, their works can mainly be distinguished according to the different environments that are presented in their stories, respectively: for example,

while all of Hou's films have focused mostly on the lives of rural Taiwanese, Yang's pictures consistently reflect a fascination with exploring the experiences of urban dwellers, largely in the sprawling capital city of Taipei. Nevertheless, I am trying to clarify that both Hou and Wu have also evidenced a great deal of novelty and innovation in their own films, in part, by using techniques that are remarkably similar to those of Yang. Thus, if one desired to use fairly unconventional films as a means to problematize the application of focalization to film studies, one could just as easily do so through an examination of many of the works that were produced by his peers. In this way, I must admit that my decision to single out the films of Yang as the material basis for an analysis of the topic at hand is somewhat arbitrary and might have been rooted originally in my appreciation of the specific types of characters, themes and aesthetics that are manifested in them.

2. Deleyto's Application of Focalization to Film

At present, if one were to conduct an on-line search for websites or publications that contain the terms "focalization" and "film analysis," one would be overwhelmed by the high number of instances in which the terminology of focalization is used frequently in film reviews. However, very few thinkers have questioned the extent to which theories of focalization may or may not be applicable to an analysis of cinema, and yet the term itself has been taken for granted and deployed with little discretion in a wide variety of film critiques. To my knowledge, Francois Jost is the first to undertake an evaluation of the applicability of focalization to film analysis in his article *Narration(s): en deçà et au-delà* (1983), but his discussion of the subject is fairly brief and insubstantial – we will mention his contributions shortly. By comparison, it is clear that the scholarship of Celestino Deleyto reflects a markedly vigorous and thorough effort to apply focalization, specifically Bal's model, to the realm of cinema. Overall, compared to other film theorists who have explored these issues, Deleyto is by far the most supportive towards using Bal's model in film analysis, so much so that he does not even identify a need to alter the meanings of its terminology in any substantial way. Because most of the questions that I will pose later will revolve around various issues and problems raised by Deleyto's thesis, it is first necessary to explore the specific arguments that he advances.

In his article *Focalisation in Film Narrative* (1992), Deleyto attributes a

considerable degree of usefulness to the triadic typology that was first used by Bal to distinguish between the three essential layers that are, according to her, contained within all narrative texts. First, there is the layer of *fabula*, which is defined as the sum total of “...a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by [the] actors”¹⁰ that inhabit a given story world. In more conventional terms, the *fabula* is roughly equivalent to what we identify as the raw elements of a plot structure in any fictional or historical narrative. Second, we have the *story* layer, which is essentially the presentation of a *fabula* in a particular mode and style of elaboration. In other words, through the construction of any narrative text, the core events of a plot are inevitably transformed, manipulated and coloured by additional forms of description and exposition in the mapping out of a story world.¹¹ For Bal, all forms of fictional media contain the two essential layers of *fabula* and *story*, but it is only according to the specific language signs that are situated at the third layer of *text* that our analysis of narrative instances may

¹⁰ Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 5.

¹¹ Bal’s conception of the *fabula* and *story* layers is largely congruous with the traditional notions of *sjuzet* and *fabula* that were initially established by Russian formalists, most notably Vladimir Propp. In essence, the former term describes a series of events as they are narrated and presented to a viewer, while the latter term refers to a series of narrated events laid out in chronological order. Overall, these general definitions of the terms would seem to be equivalent to Bal’s notions of *story* and *fabula*, respectively - see Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928) and *Theory of Literature* (1965) for an exhaustive treatment of *sjuzet* and *fabula*. Meanwhile, other theorists have used the terms *plot* or *discourse* to denote the actual processes of narration, whereas *story* has been deployed to account for the content of what is narrated. Various treatments of *discourse* can be found in numerous works by Genette, but his books *Narrative Discourse* (1980) and *Narrative Discourse Revisited* (1988) seem to provide the most clear and concise explanations of the term. For a definition of *plot*, specifically in relation to film, see Bordwell’s *Film Art: An Introduction*, 6th ed. (2001). However, Bal’s introduction of the third layer of *text* does, in itself, reflect a departure from previously established models within narratology.

ultimately vary and diverge.¹² According to her, "...a *text* is a finite, structured whole composed of language signs," but, "...this does not mean that the text itself is finite, for its meanings, effects, functions, and background are not."¹³ In other words, a text is only finite in so far it must contain a limited number of linguistic markers that are bound by a beginning and an end, whether these might be the first and last words of a novel or the first and last images of a film – however, this is not to suggest that the implications of these markers cannot be multiple, subjective and even limitless, particularly in relation to how we, as an audience, interpret their meanings. Here, one must bear in mind that the terms "text" and "language signs" are deployed somewhat loosely and metaphorically, especially in relation to the medium of film. Obviously, the sophisticated technology of cinema can enable us to perceive far more than just printed words and, as such, when we speak of a film text and its language signs we are referring to the full range of visual and aural stimuli that are manifested in the presentation of a given movie, as was once noted by the semiologist Christian Metz.¹⁴

According to Bal, it is at the story layer that the process of focalization serves as a powerful vehicle for transforming the raw data of the fabula into a detailed story, which is, in turn, inscribed onto the text and can, therefore, provide us with an array of sensual and psychological experiences on behalf of both characters and narrators. That is not to suggest that characters and narrators are both situated at the story layer, as Bal contends that the only the former belongs to that part of the narrative, while the latter exists exclusively at the textual layer.¹⁵ On the surface, it seems logical to assume that characters can only belong to the story layer, for not only do they inhabit and experience the "here and now" of a narrative's story world, but, as previously argued, they could not possibly share the same knowledge that is attributed to the narrator since he/she must exist in a time and place that is separate from that which is occupied by the characters

¹² Ibid. See also Celestino Deleyto, "Focalisation in Film Narrative," *Atlantis* XIII, no. 1-2 (November, 1992): 162.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ For more on Metz's treatment of semiology and cinema, see *Film Language: A Semiotics of Cinema* (1974).

¹⁵ Ibid., 9.

themselves even in relation to so-called first-person narratives – however, we shall soon see that this understanding of the story layer does not always apply to the cinematic medium. Meanwhile, in terms of narration, Bal argues that the, “...narrative agent, or narrator, [is]...the linguistic subject, a function and not a person, which expresses itself in the language that constitutes the text,” and, therefore, it must be situated at the textual layer.¹⁶ This viewpoint is certainly consistent with her claim that, “As soon as there is language, there is a speaker who utters it; as soon as those linguistic utterances constitute a narrative text, there is a narrator.”¹⁷

On the whole, I believe that this perspective on narration is somewhat agreeable given that a narrative text, regardless of its medium, is able to convey language signs that could imply information and commentary that is not available to the characters themselves, a condition of which represents the most essential of distinctions between the respective functions of characters and narrators. In Chapter II, it will be demonstrated that various scenes from Yang’s films can reveal information (at the textual level) that is relevant, if not crucial, to our understanding of the characters without them being privy to such knowledge and, therefore, the connection that Bal draws between processes of narration and the textual layer is fairly sound in itself. However, it will also be shown that Yang’s films contain scenes that indicate how characters themselves can temporarily perform, or at least contribute to, processes of narration because they exhibit a level of awareness that seems identical to that which is attributed to the tracts of narration that are evidenced by the film text. As such, these instances would imply that we can not always situate characters at the story layer and, therefore, the distinction that Bal draws between story and text, in terms of where she situates characters and narrators, becomes fairly ambiguous, as argued by Deleyto himself. As we will see later, this problem largely hinges on the failure of the terms external and internal focalization to indicate the extent to which we can or cannot gain access to the thoughts, emotions and experiences of characters, for, as I will soon explain in greater detail, processes of focalization are frequently ambiguous and often exist simultaneously in film, so much so that it is often difficult to determine whether or not the perspective that we are presented with originates

¹⁶ Ibid., 16.

¹⁷ Ibid., 22.

from a character, a narrator or a figure that might actually belong to both of these categories (i.e. a character-narrator).

This brings us back to the subject of focalization. The term itself mainly originated from the fields of optics and photography, but over time it was incorporated into literary and film studies, especially in its application to narrative analysis. In general, focalization is commonly defined as: 1) “to bring [something] to a focus” or 2) “to come to a focus,” while it is frequently associated with other words such as “localize” or “concentrate.”¹⁸ However, in relation to film studies, Deleyto’s conception of focalization is based on Bal’s definition of the term as, “...the relationship between the vision and that which is ‘seen’, perceived.”¹⁹ As was briefly mentioned in Section 1, in film narratives, the perspectives of characters, as well as the objects and actions that are contained within them, are often brought into focus or emphasized to varying degrees usually in an effort to qualify the ways in which audience members perceive and interpret them. In most films, the vast majority of scenes appear to be objectified by the effaced vantage point of the camera, which can be deployed to capture far more information than is available to the characters themselves. When we are faced with such instances of supposed objectivity, we can, according to Deleyto, regard these as examples of *external focalization* – they are qualified as external simply because they are not presented from the perspectives of those figures, namely the characters, that are internal to the immediate time and place of the story. By assuming that there is a universe that is separate from that which is occupied by the characters, we can logically describe the presentation of the subjective experiences of characters as instances of *internal focalization* – not only are these considered to be internal due to their location within the story world, but also because they are presented, both literally and figuratively, through the eyes or the mind’s eye of a character. This marked distinction compels Deleyto to distinguish between the kinds of textual markers that are used in film, through the application of various techniques, to achieve different forms of external and internal focalization – most of these techniques will be discussed in Chapter II. In general, he looks to the methods of camera

¹⁸ Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, s.v. “focalization,” <<http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary?book=Dictionary&va=focalization&x=0&y=0>> (2005).

¹⁹ Bal, 142.

work and editing to map out the ways in which focalization is realized in film. For example, the conventional point-of-view (POV) shot is classified as a clear-cut form of internal focalization since it is deployed to depict the visual field of an individual character through the camera frame.²⁰

Internal focalization is specifically the process of revealing, depicting and emphasizing a character's point of view, but even this statement must be qualified further, for it is possible to distinguish between two different types of perspective that are brought to bear in cinema: first, when the viewer is allowed to visually and/or aurally perceive what a given character experiences; and second, when the viewer is able to gain greater insight into a character's emotional and psychological state. Yet, Deleyto does not identify a need to differentiate between the perceptual and psychological realms according to distinctive terms.²¹ Instead, his analysis of various case studies seems to imply that we can, on the one hand, isolate these processes according to the specific context of a film or, on the other hand, accept that we may be incapable of distinguishing between them at all in some exceptional cases, especially those that reflect elements of ambiguous focalization. Ultimately, Deleyto's position is quite agreeable, for in relation to most, if not all, presentations of character based subjectivity, it would be pointless to separate the perceptual from the psychological, given that we, as spectators, are ultimately concerned with how a character reacts, in both mind and body, to all forms of perceptual stimuli. As Bal argues, focalization is, first and foremost, concerned with *how* a character views the objects he/she perceives and this is not so much meant in terms of the physical or bio-chemical processes that facilitate their acts of perception, but rather their cognitive, psychological and emotional responses to the stimuli that is transmitted by such processes. According to her:

“Perception depends on so many factors that striving for objectivity is pointless.

To mention only a few factors: one's position with respect to the perceived object,

²⁰ For Deleyto's definitions of the focalization typologies as well as his discussion of the various techniques that are used to achieve different levels of focalization in film, see Deleyto, 167-175.

²¹ Ibid., 160. As Deleyto points out, “It is only the ‘perceived’ information, physical or psychological, that appears in the text.”

the fall of the light, the distance, *previous knowledge, psychological attitude* [italics added] towards the object; all this and more affects the picture one forms and passes on to others.”²²

Consider the following example - films have commonly used the convention of the POV shot (also known as the subjective shot and eyeline match) in which the visual field of a character becomes presented within the camera frame. As a result, we are granted with temporary access to a representation of the perceptual experience that is undertaken by the character. However, most films would ultimately resort to an externally focalized shot of the character either before or after the POV in order to provide visual markers that could anchor the viewer’s comprehension that a shift in levels of focalization is indeed taking place. In many cases, these externally focalized shots would present the reactions of a character to what he/she sees by displaying his/her facial expressions or other forms of body language. In turn, the depiction of a character’s physical reaction can allow us to make inferences on the specific nature of his/her thoughts or feelings. At times, the purpose of a POV shot might not rest upon a need to present the visual experience of a character, since it, “...might function solely to give us access to the thoughts of a character,”²³ as noted by Murray Smith. However, I would argue that it is not just the POV shot, but the entire sequence of shots, including those that present a character’s reactions, that are essential to anchoring our interpretations.

Regardless, even a simple POV shot can serve well to reflect far more than just the perceptual experience of a given character. By extension, it is not surprising that Deleyto finds little value in Jost’s proposal that we should distinguish between focalization, *ocularization* and *auricularization*²⁴ according to psychological, visual and aural experiences, respectively, since Deleyto views these as being largely inseparable.

²² Bal, 142.

²³ Murray Smith, “Altered States: Character and Emotional Response in Cinema,” *Cinema Journal* 33, No. 4 (Summer, 1994): 50.

²⁴ Francois Jost, “Narration(s): en deçà et au-delà,” *Communications* 38 (1983): 196-210. For more information on Jost’s views towards point of view in film, consult his full-length work *L’Oeil-caméra: Entre film et roman* (1987).

Ultimately, the issue of what a character perceives is merely secondary, since the question of how he/she perceives something, and what this might reveal about his/her state of mind, is of the utmost importance. However, it should be noted, here, that I have chosen to expand our definition of focalization to allow us to consider the role of aural stimuli, unlike Deleyto who does not explicitly state if the variable of *intra-diegetic* sound should be considered in our analysis.²⁵ That said, I suspect that since Deleyto frequently uses the term “perceptual acts” to describe one of the focalizing functions of characters, then there should be no reason for us not to include the variable of sound within our definition.

In presentations of both the perceptual and psychological fields the presence and/or impact of the focalization of a particular character’s experience can only be identified and judged relative to the focalization of other characters or objects at a given moment or, in other words, by contrasting the embedded levels of focalization that are available to us. Moreover, in most cases, manifestations of the perceptual form of character focalization are fairly direct and obvious, while those of the psychological type are usually far more covert, as they, in part, rely more on subtle cues within the film text that are intended to activate the audience’s ability to identify or empathize with the mental state of a character according to reasoned inference, rather than rely on the objectivity that is afforded through realistic presentations of sensory based experiences. Although our access to the psychological experience of a character may be constrained somewhat by the abstract or covert nature of his/her symbolic gestures (e.g. body language), the film theorist Noel Carroll argues, on the basis of much evidence from the field of cognitive psychology, that devices such as the POV shot are used, “...to convey

²⁵ The term *intra-diegetic* stems from Aristotle’s notion of *diegesis*, which is essentially equivalent to the story world that is manifested in the layers of story and text – in simpler terms, it is the entire universe that is inhabited by the characters of any narrative. Genette expanded on *diegesis* by developing the adjectival variations of *extra-diegetic* and *intra-diegetic* to draw distinctions between those who are external (i.e. narrators) and internal (i.e. characters) to the story world. I have chosen to use these terms simply because they serve as convenient linguistic tools for the sake of clarity and conciseness.

information about emotion...by engaging the spectator's innate capacity to recognize the gross category into which the character's expression falls."²⁶ In other words, these kinds of techniques permit us to activate our ability to recognize and identify what Carroll calls the "global emotional state" of a relevant character and, therefore, they certainly represent a heightening of what Bal and others call internal focalization.

3. Ambiguous Focalization and the Limitations of the External-Internal Typologies

Thus, even a POV shot sequence can indicate that there are typically multiple levels of both external and internal focalization that can coexist in an ambiguous and/or simultaneous manner throughout all levels of a film narrative. This is due to the ability of film to present a narrative in "real-time," unlike the medium of literature. In a rather paradoxical sense, "This odd phenomenon – a character who is both object and mediator of our vision,"²⁷ serves to both clarify and complicate our understanding of the potential simultaneity of various levels of focalization in film in so far as it implies that the fluctuating lines between layers of focalization can become so blurred that, at times, it is nearly impossible to identify just whose field of perception is being emphasized in a given scene. In other words, the transitions from external to internal levels of focalization, in film, are often fluid to such a great extent that different modes of focalization appear to exist on-screen simultaneously, at times, so much so that it would be quite problematic, if not impossible, to differentiate between them according to distinct levels.²⁸

Moreover, while Deleyto attributes a great deal of applicability to Bal's conception of focalization, he, nevertheless, contends that it is her marked distinction between the layers of story and text that become problematized by instances of internal and ambiguous focalization in film and, consequently, he asks some very pertinent

²⁶ Noel Carroll, "Toward a Theory of Point-of-View Editing: Communication, Emotion, and the Movies," *Poetics Today* 14, No. 1 (Spring, 1993): 132.

²⁷ Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 160.

²⁸ For a discussion of Deleyto's views on ambiguous or double focalization, see Deleyto, 167.

questions. In general, he raises the issue of whether or not processes of focalization are inscribed onto the film text and determines that there are numerous moments in which the lines between the layers of story and text become blurred through processes of internal focalization – for example, when a POV shot presents the vision of a character.²⁹ However, even Bal admits that, “Sometimes that difference is void, e.g. when the reader is presented with a vision as directly as possible. The different agents then cannot be isolated, they coincide [i.e. one major form of ambiguous focalization].” As such, even Bal seems to hedge somewhat on her differentiation between story and text, albeit only in relation to internal or ambiguous forms of focalization. Nonetheless, she attempts to maintain the distinction by arguing that, “...the speech act of narrating is still different from the vision, the memories, the sense perceptions, thoughts, that are being told [i.e. narrated].” While I believe that this distinction holds true for most, if not all, examples, of literature, in part, due to the traditional tendency for literature to contain overt forms of narration that clearly originate from a world that is different from that of the story, I must contend that the layers of story and text seem to overlap or even merge in most film scenes, particularly in those that do not contain voice-over narration or inter-titles, as argued by Deleyto.³⁰ If we consider how Bal argues that characters and focalization belong to the story layer, while narrating agents belong to the textual layer, then would this not imply that characters along with the processes of focalization that they perform could, in fact, be aspects of the film text? If so, could it not be said that character-focalizers can temporarily act as narrators during these ambiguous moments?

On this issue, I am confident that my forthcoming discussion of Yang’s films will confirm that focalization is indeed a part of the film text and can be manifested as such in a variety of different ways; at the very least, it should indicate that it is often problematic to separate clearly the layers of story and text in some motion pictures. Furthermore, I suspect that my explorations will indicate that character-focalizers are able to serve as narrators or, at the very least, make significant contributions to processes of narration in film – we will explore the subject of narration in film, particularly in relation to Deleyto’s

²⁹ For Deleyto’s critique of Bal’s distinction between the layers of story and text in film, see Deleyto, 162.

³⁰ Ibid.

viewpoint on the issue, in Section 5 of this chapter. However, unlike Deleyto, I would even go as far to argue that characters are able to contribute to tracts of narration during some instances of external focalization as well, even though we, the spectators, are only permitted to see the characters from a seemingly detached point of view that could not possibly grant us with direct access to their perceptual faculties. Although we will touch upon these issues in my upcoming discussion of the use of inter-titles in *A Confucian Confusion*, these will be explored at even greater length during my analysis of *Yi Yi*, particularly in relation to the film's presentation of a projection sequence and dream sequence, both of which rely on rather surreal elements of mise-en-scene to relate moods that arguably stem from the phenomenological and emotional realms of the featured characters.

Ultimately, I would argue that the apparent collision between the layers of story and text in film is largely tied to ambiguous focalization itself, a condition of which, by default, calls into question the utility of the external-internal sub-classifications that both Bal and Deleyto advocate as useful modes of analysis. On this issue, I am confident that my upcoming analysis of Yang's works will demonstrate how a great deal of ambiguity can be generated by the application of the external-internal dichotomy that is used to distinguish between the locations from which objects are focalized, at times, so much so that the extra-diegetic (i.e. the external/off-screen positions of the camera and sound recording devices) and intra-diegetic (i.e. the story world that is presented within the camera frame) realms seem to merge with one another, particularly through the vehicle of mise-en-scene, something of which could only be regarded as intra-diegetic. The limitations of the external-internal typologies are reflected by the ability of the camera to present a supposedly neutral perspective that captures the externalized manifestations of character based experience without any direct access to his/her perceptual or mental fields. Hence, through numerous case studies, it will be shown that the so-called third person point of view that is manifested by the camera can be just as effective at reflecting the personal experiences of characters as the kinds of subjective shots and editing that are associated with instances of internal focalization. If this is the case, it would be quite reasonable to question the degree to which the external and internal sub-categorizations are useful at all. This, I believe, reflects the inherent limitation of the external-internal typologies of focalization and, as such, one could posit that we are in need of a new

category to account for these ambiguous instances. Although the terms double focalization or ambiguous focalization have been proposed by Bal and Deleyto to describe these confounding moments in cinema, I must contend that such labels merely account for our identification of the problem, that is our inability to make firm distinctions, as opposed to suggesting a way to work through and better understand coinciding levels of focalization. In accordance with Deleyto, I would argue that, in these cases, we must look for more subtle cues within the film text in order to arrive at more accurate conclusions and make distinctions.³¹

4. Auto-focalization as a Valuable Alternative to Ambiguous Focalization

In 1993, the film theorists Luis Miguel and Garcia Mainar developed the new concept of *auto-focalization* to work through the ambiguities that are reflected when the internal focalization of characters is depicted implicitly through the external vantage point of the camera. They point out that “External focalisation has been interpreted as a sign of objectivity and detachment,”³² while internal focalization has been viewed, by many critics, as a manifestation of pure character based subjectivity, particularly in cases when we are presented exclusively with the visual field of a character through editing techniques such as the shot-reverse shot or eyeline match. However, they rightfully argue that such generalizations produce inaccurate understandings of the true complexity of focalization processes, and they demonstrate through an analysis of various films, including Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Birds* (1963), Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and Robert Altman’s *M*A*S*H* (1970), that instances of external focalization are not only able to reveal much about the subjective experiences of characters, but are necessary in anchoring shot sequences that centre on the internal focalization of perceptual experiences as well. The classifications for techniques of internal focalization that were developed by thinkers such as Deleyto and Branigan (the latter’s model will be discussed shortly) suggest that the process relies heavily on the inclusion of reaction shots that serve as essential markers for our detection of the

³¹ Ibid., 167.

³² Louis Miguel and Garcia Mainar, “Auto-focalisation in Film Narrative,” *Atlantis* XV, no. 1-2 (May-November, 1993): 154.

meaning and motivation behind a shift from external to internal levels of focalization and vice-versa. As Deleyto has observed, “Subjectivity is often expressed in a film without the complete disappearance of the external focaliser as a distinct agent from the character whose vision or mind we are made to share.”³³

Thus, motion pictures frequently rely on the objective vantage point of the camera to capture a character’s physical, cognitive and emotional responses to his/her act of perception, and this grants us with varying degrees of access to his/her attitude at that precise moment. As Miguel and Mainar observe, “In all cases of internal focalisation the film always resorts ultimately to external focalisation, as in cinema it is difficult to offer the focaliser and the focalised in the same shot.”³⁴ The authors develop their argument by establishing that focalization in film is intimately related to *mimesis*, which can be defined, in general, as the “...imitative representation of the real world in art and literature,”³⁵ by which each narrative device requires an iconic or representative form of enactment. We are seldom presented in cinema with direct forms of narration in which an agent consciously addresses the audience from a posterior time and place by providing a verbal report of the events that once took place in the story world. Obviously, when film characters discover information through the reception of new perceptual stimuli, their reactions are brought to life through the talents of the actors who play them, especially through the vehicles of dialogue, facial expressions and body language. They do not address the audience and describe their responses to changing circumstances as if they were a self-conscious narrator (except for a small number of exceptional cases), as this would severely violate our ability to engage in a suspension of disbelief whereby the story is accepted, albeit with a proverbial “grain of salt,” as an aspect of the real world. The success of most film narratives, in part, relies upon the degree to which the environment, characters and events of a story world are realistic and convincing to an audience. Thus, mimetic actions are equivalent to unobtrusive or indirect forms of

³³ Deleyto, 168.

³⁴ Miguel and Mainar, 154.

³⁵ AskOxford.com, s.v. “mimesis,”

<http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/mimesis?view=uk> (2005).

communication that are not based on verbal or written signs.³⁶

In literature, the mediation of narrators and focalizers is necessary for the reader to develop a coherent understanding of the heterogeneous story world that is transmitted strictly through the abstraction of the medium's verbal language. In cinema, the spectator must build up his/her conception of the richness of a story world partly through the faculty of eyesight, a medium which shifts the emphasis away from the intermediary of narration (i.e. narrators or focalizers) to the object of perception itself. While characters usually form the primary focus of our attention in all narratives, fictional or otherwise, the vivid cinematography of films allows us to perceive, almost instantaneously, most or even all of the objects that occupy a character's physical environment in any given scene. Here, the term "objects" is used somewhat loosely to account for all aspects of mise-en-scene, all of which are particularly crucial to understanding processes of focalization and character based subjectivity in the films of Edward Yang, as will be demonstrated later in exhaustive detail.

Miguel and Mainar propose that a certain part of the overall process of focalization, external or otherwise, is carried out by the imagery of mise-en-scene, almost as if the surface images of characters and objects were focalizing themselves and providing us with supplemental information about a film's characters and their attitudes. In light of this observation, it is not surprising that the authors chose to deploy the new term *auto-focalization* to account for these instances in which objects allow us to gain greater insight on the inner workings of a character's mind. In general, "Auto-focalisation is the capacity of the text to offer to the viewer an attitude about itself, regardless of whether focalised internally or externally,"³⁷ - here, I believe, the authors are not so much implying that the text has a true sense of agency, but are, instead, suggesting that those objects of the text that are somehow related to the persona of a character can, in fact, convey additional information about his/her psychological conditions or predispositions.

³⁶ Miguel and Mainar, 154-155. For a discussion of Deleyto's views on mimesis in film, see Deleyto, 163-164. For a historical overview of various theories on mimesis in film, see Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 3-15.

³⁷ Miguel and Mainar, 157.

On the whole, this is supported by Seymour Chatman's claim that, in film, the mental state of a character can be revealed through the mere physical display of his/her attitude towards what he/she is doing at a given moment. Chatman points out that in literature a character's perspective could only be reconstructed within the mind's eye of the reader only on the basis of the narrator's descriptions and commentaries. However, as previously discussed, during instances of external focalization, the technology of film allows us to access two different perspectives at once: the first is the purely perceptual vantage point that is provided to us by the camera frame, while the second is the attitudinal position of the character that we can infer on the basis of his/her physical behaviour. Ultimately, cinematography cannot avoid representing all of the objects that are contained within the frame whereas novelists can more easily restrict our field of information to that which is only available to a character even without referring directly to the object of his/her perception or attitude.³⁸ Thus, the medium of film can transmit to us a rich array of visual and aural codes that go well beyond the confines of just the spoken or written word and, in turn, these codes can enhance our understanding of a character's standpoint in relation to the actions and objects that surround him/her through the process of auto-focalization.

Bearing this in mind, let us now explore two aspects of auto-focalization. First, film scenes often present the physical reaction of a character to what he/she has just perceived and it is on the basis of this image alone that we might infer the ways in which such an event has affected him/her. This point is congruous with Deleyto's observation that, "Most times, the perception of one or several characters of the fabula is emphasized by the text while the external focalizer still keeps its enveloping position."³⁹ Obviously, some might argue that a reaction shot is merely a form of external focalization that denies us access to a character's mental position, and this is usually quite true in the case of in depth shots that are filmed from a vantage point that is markedly distanced from the characters. However, I fully agree with the authors when they state that, "Auto-focalisation...opens up the possibility of considering examples of traditional external

³⁸ Seymour Chatman, "What Novels Can Do That Films Can't (and Vice Versa)," in *On Narrative*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 135-136.

³⁹ Deleyto, 171.

focalisation as somehow internal,”⁴⁰ particularly when the facial expressions and body language of a character are highlighted in a given shot. This mode of interpretation is reflected similarly by the second aspect of auto-focalization, which occurs when we are led to presume that certain objects might bear a marked degree of significance, often symbolically, to the character and, thus, we are allowed to extrapolate more information on his/her psychological predispositions – many examples of these relationships will be discussed in Chapter II.

In general, auto-focalization represents an attempt to confront the ambiguity of the external-internal typologies of Deleyto’s model that we had discussed in the previous section. Fortunately, the newer theory permits us to transcend the paradoxical implications of those typologies by encouraging us to focus exclusively on the meanings that are implied through the visual features of a shot in relation to what we already know about a character through plot development and dialogue. Granted, some might contend that the authors’ efforts reflect a leap in logic that confuses two different levels of the film narrative text: that is, if the surface image of a character or other objects has the capacity to provide additional information about a character him/herself, then this would seem to confuse the supposedly separate levels of film character (in terms of its resemblance to a real life person) and film image, the former being an aspect of the story layer; the latter being a purely textual component. However, one could argue that it would be unfounded to separate both of these levels, since the viewer can only rely on the film text itself to formulate interpretations, and it is ultimately, “...the text (a collection of images, light and shadow) that builds up the different characters through performance, dialogue, props, setting, etc.”⁴¹

Overall, the greatest benefit of this approach lies in its capacity to recognize the importance of externally focalized shots for their own sake, which are often ignored since they are viewed largely as irrelevant to internal focalization, the most widely studied aspect of the overall theory.⁴² In part, the neglect of external focalization is due to the sense of detachment, neutrality and objectivity that is conventionally associated with the

⁴⁰ Miguel and Mainar, 158.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 159.

external gaze of the camera, which I would argue is entirely inaccurate and misleading. Indeed, compared to Deleyto's categories of focalization, auto-focalization can be more useful in revealing a higher number of signifying codes that provide more clues on a character's state of mind, ones that are not necessarily dependent on a prior or posterior act of perception on behalf of him/her.

Thus, Miguel and Mainar offer a fresh approach to the study of focalization in film, one that, above all, frees us from the entrenched connotations of objectivity and subjectivity that are frequently associated with external and internal focalization, respectively. Most importantly, the concept acknowledges the capacity for characters to become focalized through the iconic nature of the visual materiality that is inscribed onto the film text. Despite this, I am somewhat reluctant to accept the author's assertion that, "Auto-focalisation increases the power of both internal and external focalisation to throw light on the relationships among the different elements of a film narrative,"⁴³ as, in actuality, it seems to imply the opposite. While I agree that the external-internal typologies are successful in distinguishing between the locations from which a shot originates, I must contend that the conventional implications of these terms do not readily enable us to understand the often profound implications that are posed by elements of *mise-en-scene* in reflecting the consciousness of characters. Furthermore, because external focalization has the potential to convey as much character based subjectivity as its terminological counterpart, I fail to see how the external-internal subcategories are truly distinct other than by virtue of their respective connotations of spatial positioning *vis-à-vis* the camera.

Ultimately, one might argue that the label external focalization is more useful for understanding the processes of narration that are reflected, often quite unobtrusively, through the positioning, framing and angle of the camera, variables of which can all serve to nuance or even transform our knowledge of the characters without their mediation, or any other interference, for that matter, from anything contained within the story world. However, even this claim serves well to emphasize, once again, the ambiguities implied by the external-internal typologies, as, in this case, we are simply relating the supposedly external elements of camera work, albeit in terms of narration, to the characters and

⁴³ Ibid., 166.

objects that occupy the internal reality of the story world. As such, one level cannot exist without the other and, therefore, it is quite problematic to pinpoint, with assurance, the points at which each level begins and ends, even if we break down complicated shot sequences in great detail.

In the end, regardless of whether we are offered an external or internal gaze into the story world of a film, are we, the audience, not principally concerned with how the angle and composition of this perspective relates to the specific subjective experiences of the characters themselves? Are the phenomenological realms of the characters and the relationships of inter-subjectivity that exist between them not the primary focus of our attention? The answer to this question is an absolute affirmative and, therefore, despite the benefits that they might provide in analysing the spatial origin of a shot, the external-internal typologies of focalization are too limited to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of how a character relates to his/her environment and vice-versa. Above all, the connotations of the qualifying marker, external, run the risk of implying that we should not consider the internal figures, shapes and colours that are presented within the *mise-en-scene* of a film in our broader interpretation of character based subjectivity. Of course, Deleyto is quite aware of this problem, and even goes to great lengths to ensure that we are well advised of the potential pitfalls that might arise from such a misguided mode of analysis, but, unfortunately, he is unable to provide alternative categories that could dispel these ambiguities, while he seems to situate *mise-en-scene* outside of the external and internal typologies possibly due to their implicit emphasis on the angle and position of the camera.⁴⁴ This is not to suggest that we should altogether abandon Deleyto's model of focalization, as I believe that it is quite useful for juxtaposing the different vantage points that can be occupied by the camera, which could enhance our understanding of the specific techniques that are used in film editing to manifest variations in visual perspective. Furthermore, as will be demonstrated in Section 5, Deleyto's efforts are fairly successful in highlighting how most, if not all, narratives contain multiple levels of narration that stem from both extra-diegetic and intra-diegetic sources.

Nevertheless, we must come to an understanding that the external and internal

⁴⁴ See Deleyto, 164.

labels function purely as convenient markers that oversimplify the sheer complexity of a multi-faceted process that often blurs the lines between objectivity and subjectivity in cinema. While I admit that these subcategories might serve as the best, if not the only, linguistic tools to indicate when the camera explicitly presents a character's viewpoint or not, they are not successful in accounting for the exceptional cases of extreme ambiguity that are reflected in more unconventional films, such as those of Edward Yang. By contrast, the notion of auto-focalization avoids the fallacy of using the position and angle of the camera as a primary starting point for developing an analysis of character based perspective. Moreover, unlike in Deleuze's model, it draws our attention towards objects that might bear a considerable degree of significance to a character's persona and psychological predispositions, regardless of whether or not he/she has explicitly perceived them in the on-screen world of a film story.

That is not to suggest that the alternative model of auto-focalization completely resolves the tensions that exist between various levels of perspective and, for that matter, narration in a film, as one could rightfully suspect that the application of the concept might lead to the emergence of more questions, rather than answers. As a side note, I must admit that the use of the prefix "auto" in the terminology is rather troubling as it seems to suggest that the film text, a non-living entity, is a self-conscious agent that can whimsically refer to the various components of its story world whenever such an action would appear to add greater depth to the colouring of a narrative. However, I am sure that the authors would urge us not to accept their anthropomorphic vocabulary at face value, and instead would prefer that we view these terms merely as metaphoric extensions. In general, the field of narratology has reflected almost countless efforts to think of narrative and textual processes in anthropomorphic terms, as, for example, is reflected in our conventional notions of the narrator or *implied author* (the latter term will be described in the following section), both of whom we tend to forget are non-living figures.

However, a more important criticism could be raised in regards to the author's claim concerning the ability of the auto-focalized image to represent meanings outside of a causal chain that links the shots together within the real-time presentation of a film. As they note, "Auto-focalisation allows isolated, independent shots a great amount of signification, therefore proposing an area of communication and expression which does

not require a syntagmatic chain of signs in order to exist.”⁴⁵ While I certainly agree that the surface image of a shot, by itself, could contribute to character focalization, it would be too simplistic not to relate the meanings that are implied through the textual image to the overall temporal context and plot structure of a film, for surely such a comparative mode of analysis would allow us to arrive at an even richer, more nuanced understanding of character based subjectivity. In other words, the textual material of an auto-focalized shot might not readily symbolize any form of discernible meaning unless we view it in relation to the events, actions, dialogue, and images that are disclosed in other scenes. At the very least, the analysis of a surface image completely outside of the entire temporal order of a film could result in the generation of interpretations that are far too narrow, limited and inaccurate than those that could be achieved through a more holistic, comparative approach. As will be shown in Chapter II, the information that is revealed through instances of auto-focalization in Yang’s films, particularly through the body language of the actors or the symbolic implications that are represented by key objects, cannot be rendered as meaningful if we do not relate the textual codes that are transmitted in such shots to the contextual meanings that are conveyed through the dialogue and the causal chain of events of his film narratives, both of which are situated at the layers of story and fabula, respectively. As a result, the applicability of auto-focalization to film analysis is somewhat contingent upon one’s awareness of other forms of information, the details of which are not affected by nor dependent upon presentations of externally or internally focalized shots.

Instead, I would argue that instances of auto-focalization perform a vital function in so far as they serve remarkably well to mark emphatically or highlight the broader forms of information that are manifested through the dialogue and plot structure of a film. It is arguable that without the inclusion of auto-focalized shots we could not be as confident in our interpretation of the characters’ psychological conditions nor would our knowledge of the thematic content be as nuanced, given that the visual markers of auto-focalization in Yang’s films act as perceptual anchors that illuminate the beliefs, desires, strengths and weaknesses of his protagonists usually by representing extensions of their consciousness. This is especially evident when we consider the roles of props, lighting

⁴⁵ Miguel and Mainar, 161.

and other aspects of mise-en-scene, and how all of these factors relate to the consciousness of Yang's characters. Ultimately, concerning the markedly complex narrative schemes that are presented in self-reflexive films, auto-focalization proves to be more successful in working through the arduous procedure of distinguishing between different modes of character based consciousness and perspective according to the significations posed by the materiality of the visual image, as will be demonstrated in Chapter II. Moreover, by achieving these greater insights on the inner workings of the characters' hearts and minds, we would, in turn, be in a better position to understand the broader thematic content that is reflected, often implicitly, in these types of films.

At this point, it is prudent to point out that while the application of focalization theory by Jost, Deleyto, Miguel and Mainar represents fairly novel efforts within film studies, other thinkers have developed similar typological systems to account for different manifestations of point of view in cinema. Most notably, in *Narrative Comprehension and Film*, Edward Branigan maps out his own definition for the concept of focalization, which he views, in essence, as an attempt to represent the "consciousness of" a character, but, not surprisingly, he also identifies a need to make more specific distinctions by deploying the external-internal subcategories, both of which carry implications that are congruous with those of Deleyto's model. The only subtlety that might distinguish Branigan's model is revealed through his semantic distinction between two types of internal focalization: on the one hand, internal focalization (*surface*) occurs when we are presented only with the visual field of a character, even if this might be distorted by the affects of drugs, alcohol or, say, unusual mental conditions; on the other hand, internal focalization (*depth*) is the rendering of psychological processes that are purely independent of perceptual functions, including memories, fantasies and dreams.⁴⁶ While these sub-distinctions could be quite useful in connoting the differences between perceptual and psychological experiences, if these can be truly separated from each other at all, they are, nonetheless, rather superficial.

Furthermore, Branigan does not acknowledge that levels of focalization might exist simultaneously, nor does he explicitly recognize the ambiguities implied through his conception of a dichotomous process that is, in fact, principally centred on character

⁴⁶ Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* (London: Routledge, 1992), 100-107.

based consciousness as opposed to that which is manifested, albeit abstractly, through the external gaze of the camera and elements of mise-en-scene. In his thorough discussion of a scene taken from Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* (1957), although he does examine the symbolic implications of its visual imagery in relation to some elements of mise-en-scene (most notably, a mirror reflection of the film's protagonist), he only associates these variables with processes of narration and thematic development, as opposed to external or internal forms of focalization.⁴⁷ In doing so, he implies that both focalization and narration are equivalent in their capacity to reflect the consciousness of a character, and yet he seems steadfast in maintaining his claim that, "there is a firm distinction among narration, (nonfocalized) action, and (external and internal) focalization,"⁴⁸ whereas Deleyto admits, albeit with a degree of caution, that the functions of narrators and focalizers can coincide, if not be indistinguishable, when ambiguous focalization takes place.

5. All Ambiguities Aside: The Contributions of Deleyto's Approach to Focalization

In spite of the problems that have been raised regarding the unsatisfactory limitations of the typologies of focalization that Deleyto sets forth, I, nevertheless, believe that his efforts are significant not only in presenting a fairly novel way to think about point of view in cinema, but, more importantly, in their capacity to challenge traditional conceptions that argue that stories are exclusively narrated from a so-called first person or third person perspective. Despite their inadequacies, the categories of external, internal and ambiguous focalization highlight a series of broader issues concerning the nature of narration in cinema, a problem of which has greatly troubled a wide variety of film theorists since the conception of the medium. In more general terms, Deleyto seeks to identify exactly who (or what) is a narrator in a film text, especially in relation to films that do not contain instances of voice-over narration or inter-titles. By extension, he asks if a character bound focalizer is truly a narrating agent, would this imply that film texts contain a multiplicity of narrative identities? If we assume that the ultimate function of a narrator is to mediate the presentation of a story through a point of

⁴⁷ Ibid., 104-105.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 106.

view that is ultimately slanted or biased, then would it not be reasonable to assume that the subjective experiences of characters reflected in instances of internal (and, I would argue, ambiguous) focalization are, indeed, forms of narration as well?⁴⁹

Within the field of literary narratology, the power to present subjective experiences has usually been attributed exclusively to the narrator who is viewed as a discursive master who ultimately controls the figurative switch that triggers depictions of character based experience. As such, it is not surprising that Genette, Chatman and many others contend that instances of internal focalization only appear *as if* they were presented from the perspective of a character, while, in reality, they are merely approximate representations of subjective experience that are reconstructed and, therefore, objectified by the narrator. In film studies, character subjectivity is seldom considered in relation to the broader subject of narration, as most film theorists have only concentrated on the visual qualities and techniques, particularly those associated with editing and camera work, that contribute to the manifestation of a character's perspective.⁵⁰

Of course, there are numerous films that supposedly reflect elements of first-person narratives in which a story appears to be told, at least to some degree, by a central protagonist who recalls a series of past events and relates them to an audience through, for example, voice-over narration and/or flashback sequences. Yet, placing these more personalized forms of narration under the first-person narrative category could be regarded as extremely inaccurate and tenuous. In nearly all of these films, the presence of first-person narrator is ultimately undermined or even negated by the conventional need to situate the camera from a vantage point that can capture events and characters, including the central protagonist him/herself, from a supposedly objective angle. Furthermore, voice-over narration is deployed quite infrequently in pictures principally due to the aesthetic considerations of film makers who prefer to allow the illusion of "real-time" imagery and dialogue to guide the development of a narrative rather than a

⁴⁹ Deleyto, 162.

⁵⁰ Some of the most notable examples of this tendency are reflected in the works of Jean Mitry, particularly in his two volume series *Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma* (1963, 1965).

dominant, yet detached voice of narration that appears to emanate from a time and place that is posterior to the story world.⁵¹ Hence, it is quite difficult to distinguish between forms of third-person and first-person narration in film, as both genres must ultimately rely on the presentation of a scene from an external and posterior vantage point.

Thus, by placing the entirety of a narrative under the category of either first-person or third-person, many narratologists do not allow for the possibility that a story may contain fluctuations in sources, levels and styles of narration. Fortunately, through their detailed examinations of focalization, the efforts of Deleyto and others have been successful in bringing to light the fallacy of oversimplification that such narrow conceptions have imposed on conventional understandings of narration and narrative structure. Deleyto points out that, "Film narrative does not need the existence of an explicit narrator, as this agent is defined by theories of the novel, for the activity of narration to take place."⁵² Furthermore, Deleyto develops his thesis by criticizing Branigan's reliance on the concept of *camera* as a "construct of the spectator," a "hypothesis about space" and a vehicle for the omniscience of the external focalizer and audience – that is, "...a set of frames within larger frames leading to a frame which cannot itself be framed within the boundary of the text – an unavoidable and implicit omniscience which may now be called 'effaced'."⁵³

In part, this implicitly reflects Deleyto's awareness of the problems that could easily arise from the emphatic connotations of the term external focalization in regarding the spatial position that is occupied by the neutral gaze as our primary point of reference. By extension, much of this effort also represents an attack on the conventional understandings of narration in film that were established long before the time of Branigan, most notably by V.I. Pudovkin's formulation of the *invisible* or *ideal observer*, and by Norman Friedman's notion of *camera-eye narration*,⁵⁴ both of which subsume

⁵¹ For Deleyto's perspective on voice-over narration in film, see Deleyto, 162. One can find an exhaustive treatment of the subject in Sarah Kozloff's *Invisible Storytellers. Voice-over Narration in American Fiction Film* (1988).

⁵² Deleyto, p. 163.

⁵³ Branigan, *Point of View in the Cinema* (Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1984), 71.

⁵⁴ For a decent and concise summation of these theories, see Bordwell, 9-12.

elements of mise-en-scene, particularly the behaviour of characters, to the all-encompassing function of the camera to capture all that is presented in a film. Thus, these models and others have argued, quite mistakenly, that the camera is the only true narrator of a film story, while glossing over aspects of sound and the visual composition of the scene. While the camera inevitably limits the scope of framing that surrounds the images and signs that we are able to see on-screen, it does not act as the ultimate source of narration given that films can present multiple layers of information that represent a mixture of various production techniques combined with the performances of actors, all of which are manifested within the boundaries of the frame. On the basis of this observation, it could be argued that while the camera is the ultimate external focalizer in that it frames the totality of the visual signs that are available to the audience, its role is ultimately qualified by, if not subsumed to, the various sub-levels of focalization (and, I would argue, auto-focalization) that can occur within the film text. In other words, if we accept that, "In film...there can appear, simultaneously, several focalizers external and internal, on different points of the frame (or outside),"⁵⁵ we must analyse all of the available levels of focalization in relationship to one another if we wish to arrive at a more accurate understanding of the nature of narrative voice and structure in a given movie.

That said, Deleyto is, above all, reluctant to accept Branigan's conclusion for its acknowledgement of an ultimate, yet "effaced" source of narration that supposedly bears "an unavoidable omniscience" seems quite reminiscent of the implied author, a controversial narrative typology first pioneered by Wayne Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* in 1961. Quite understandably, for Deleyto and most other narratologists, the notion that implicit traces of a real author's attitudes, ideologies, opinions and/or values could be manifested covertly in a text, film based or otherwise, seemed to be the product of unfounded forms of speculation that were far more rooted in theoretical bias rather than in reality.⁵⁶ In the eyes of many thinkers, this effaced entity that is never explicitly embodied within the text is hardly distinguishable from that of his/her real authorial counterpart and, thus, the entire concept ran the risk of undermining the exclusive text-

⁵⁵ Deleyto, p. 167.

⁵⁶ For Deleyto's critique of implied author, see Deleyto, 160-163.

based orientation of the structuralist methodology that had been strictly upheld by members of most branches of narratological study. Finally, many thinkers have failed to see how the role of the implied author is distinct from that of the traditional narrator, for, after all, both typologies refer to an agent whose world view appears to mediate the presentation of a story, even if they are differentiated by the extent to which their presence is overt or covert in relating a narrative. Despite these major objections, which I would regard as logically sound, several film theorists, most notably Chatman, have been engaging in vigorous efforts, in recent times, to reassert the implied author as an essential typology of film narratology.⁵⁷

Nevertheless, through an upcoming analysis of particular scenes in Yang's films, it will also be demonstrated that while the label of implied author may not be so accurate in terms of its definitional implications for understanding the so-called *meta-narration* of a film, there are, nonetheless, times when the style and focus of narration can undergo abrupt changes in order to relate information to an audience that is not directly relevant to the temporal relationships that surround the unfolding of events within the lives of the characters who appear to occupy the story layer.⁵⁸ These brief, yet blatant interventions are often manifested in the forms of inter-titles, voice-over narrations or abstract images that temporarily disrupt the causal and spatial order of the story world, as it is often difficult to determine if they are, indeed, extensions of character consciousness or action. The intrusion of a non-characterized narrative voice that wishes to express broad thematic concerns, usually of a philosophical or ethical nature, might indicate that a character's temporary role as a narrator, during times of internal focalization, is ultimately subsumed to this higher form of effaced narration. Conversely, this condition might simply affirm Deleuze's inference that there are indeed multiple levels of narration in film - while

⁵⁷ See Seymour Chatman, *Coming to Terms* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 74-89.

⁵⁸ Here, meta-narration refers to the highest or broadest level of narration that might be evidenced by a narrative text; that is one that would supersede, but not negate all other levels of narration that are contained within it. Later on, issues of meta-narration will be examined in relation to Yang's films, most notably in the final sections of Part I and Part II in Chapter II.

characters might not contribute directly to the additional commentary that is provided through the marked intervention of an external narrator, the information that is reflected through this act can greatly enhance our knowledge of a character's personality, attitude or emotions and, therefore, fulfil a function of internal focalization, albeit purely in a figurative sense. Although the character is not the direct agent of narration in these cases, he/she may be well aware of the conditions that are attributed to his/her psyche by, for example, an inter-title, and, in fact, he/she might even refer to these conditions prior to the external narrator's act of intervention. Thus, an inter-title or other external intrusions may simply function as emphatic markers that are merely intended to highlight information of which the character is already aware. In this way, characters can indeed function as both focalizers and narrators, at least, on a temporary basis.

6. Summation of Objectives

In sum, we will analyse the films of Edward Yang and refer to a handful of other relevant theories on subjectivity in film in order to assess both the positive and negative aspects of Deleyto's application of focalization to cinema. In doing so, we will be able to demonstrate that focalization is indeed often manifested within the textual layer of film, as Deleyto argues. More importantly, we will address a variety of pertinent questions that mostly revolve around the degree to which his conception of focalization is useful for locating the subjective viewpoints of both characters and narrators in film. Within this process, we will focus a great deal of attention on evaluating the advantages and disadvantages of deploying the external-internal focalization typologies to distinguish between the ways in which character based experiences are rendered as well as the locations from which they are viewed. Above all, it will be demonstrated that, despite its terminological implications of neutrality and objectivity, external focalization can imply a considerable degree of subjectivity, sometimes even more so than is achieved through internal focalization, principally through a consideration of the internal elements of mise-en-scene. On this issue, the upcoming analysis of *A Confucian Confusion* will serve, in part, as a means to introduce my readers to a detailed illustration of the limitations of the external-internal typologies mainly in relation to more standard forms of so-called external focalization in which the camera captures the "real-time" action (and body language) of the film's characters and story world. Meanwhile, the subsequent analysis of

Yi Yi will represent a more in depth attempt to work through more complicated forms of ambiguous focalization, most notably in relation to a colourful, yet bemusing projection sequence, a deeply puzzling dream sequence as well as the occasional depictions of the perspective of a comatose woman (as impossible as that might sound).

Moreover, we will also apply auto-focalization to illustrate how this alternative model can enhance our understanding of what Bal and Deleyto call ambiguous focalization, a condition of which, I would argue, is extant, albeit to varying degrees in most, if not all, manifestations of external focalization. By doing so, the forthcoming analysis of Yang's films will demonstrate that auto-focalization can serve as a more effective tool, principally, for the interpretation of relatively unconventional film narratives that do not conform to the standards established by classical Hollywood cinema. However, the following section will also illustrate that auto-focalization is not sufficient by itself to obviate the full range of contextual details and nuances that could potentially enrich our understanding of character consciousness without ample consideration of, first, the syntagmatic chain of shots that encompass moments of auto-focalization and, second, the previous instances of dialogue and action that are relevant to qualifying our interpretation of the auto-focalized images in question. At the same time, the upcoming analysis will show how auto-focalized shots can act as emphatic markers that are useful, if not indispensable, to anchoring our understanding of what we already know about a character's attitude, feelings, motives, strengths and weaknesses through the elements of plot, dialogue and imagery, along with the themes that would emerge from an analysis of all of these variables, that are disclosed during other shot sequences in a film.

In relation to this issue, I should mention that I will devote a considerable amount of time and space to a consideration of the thematic content of both *A Confucian Confusion* and *Yi Yi*. In turn, many people might rightfully question how such an investigation could contribute to our understanding of the extent to which theories of character focalization are applicable to the analysis of film. However, I must urge my readers to consider that the various themes that are revealed in Yang's films bear intimate or even symbiotic connections to the consciousness of his protagonists, so much so that the lines between many of this director's characters and themes become extremely blurry, if not indiscernible – this should become particularly evident in the upcoming analysis of

Yang-Yang and Ota in *Yi Yi*, both of whom represent and embody the thematic ideals of that film. Aside from these protagonists, other figures, including Ting-Ting in *Yi Yi* and Xiaoming in *A Confucian Confusion*, undergo transformations in personality and mentality whereby the thematic content of the narratives becomes an integral part of their consciousness by the end of these films. In some cases, the viewer could not be aware of such thematic considerations if the consciousness of these central characters had not undergone dramatic forms of metamorphoses, processes of which are often conveyed through instances of external, internal, ambiguous and auto-focalization.

More importantly for the purpose of this thesis, it is often the characters themselves as well as the auto-focalized symbols that surround them that are instrumental in communicating, to the audience, the thematic elements that are relevant to such moments and, therefore, we are unable to separate the higher ideals and messages of the film narratives from the characters themselves. Thus, an examination of the highest levels of thematic content that are evidenced by these films can certainly be relevant to an analysis of character focalization. In particular, such considerations can be important in demonstrating how the symbolic connotations of auto-focalized objects and images serve as emphatic markers that are significant to reinforcing the thematic content of Yang's films – specifically, mirror images, window reflections, technological devices, and other props perform this vital function in both *A Confucian Confusion* and *Yi Yi*, as will be shown in great detail in the following chapter.

In parallel to all of this is the broader question of whether or not characters can perform narrating functions through their participation in processes of external, internal and auto-focalization. It will be demonstrated that characters can often perform or, at the very least, contribute to processes of narration through all forms of focalization and, in turn, we will be able to see how the distinctions that Bal draws between the layers of story and text can become quite problematic in film. By extension, we will attempt to determine if the kinds of subject-object relations (or vice-versa) that are reflected through an application of auto-focalization to the analysis of mise-en-scene would also indicate that even non-living objects can contribute to processes of narration as well. Finally, in relation to both models of focalization, we will consider the possibility that broader forms of meta-narration may exist in film and, in turn, question whether or not this would imply that the narrating agency that Deleyto attributes to characters is problematic. Ultimately,

this thesis will demonstrate that Deleyto's perspective on character based narration is indeed widely applicable to various scenes in Yang's films as will be discussed in the upcoming analyses of the use of inter-titles in *A Confucian Confusion* and, perhaps more cogently, in the forthcoming examination of the use of mirror reflections, projections, and an intriguing dream sequence in *Yi Yi*. However, in Chapter III, it will also be proposed that these films, particularly *Yi Yi*, might contain higher levels of meta-narration that could not possibly originate from the perspectives or consciousness of the characters themselves and, therefore, these could only stem from an effaced source of narration that is situated altogether outside of the films' story worlds.

Chapter II: Case Studies

Part I – Focalization in *A Confucian Confusion*

1. Techniques of Focalization in the Films of Edward Yang

Keeping these questions in mind, let us move on to an analysis of the kinds of production methods, as outlined by Deleyto and other scholars, that are used by Edward Yang to achieve various levels of character based focalization and, by extension, give life to multiple sources of narration in his films. Furthermore, by mapping out the specific ways in which subjective experience is rendered in film, we will be able to affirm that focalization can be displayed at the textual level of film narratives, even though its codified manifestations are not always so blatant or clear-cut. As Deleyto points out, techniques such as editing, framing, camera movement, and mise-en-scene can be used in film to textualize different forms of focalization. In terms of editing, the application of the eye line match and shot/reverse shot emphasize a heightening of internal focalization as they push the audience to pay more attention to the character and the objects contained within his/her visual perspective that are featured at a given moment.¹ The former technique refers to a sequence of two shots: first, a character looks at an object that is (usually) located off-screen and then, second, the camera cuts to a shot of the object, presumably through his/her eyes. On occasion, these types of shot sequences take place in Yang's films, most notably in *Yi Yi*, but, in some cases, whether or not we can truly classify them as eyeline matches is constrained by certain technical and/or narrative elements that are not directly related to the juxtaposition of external and internal vantage points, as will be demonstrated at a later point. Meanwhile, the shot/reverse shot is conventionally deployed when characters are engaged in a face-to-face conversation: typically, this involves an alternation in shots whereby the camera cuts back and forth from the proximate visual perspectives occupied by two or more characters, respectively, while they are engaged in dialogue. Here, the visual perspectives are qualified as

¹ See Deleyto's discussion of eyeline matches and shot/reverse shots in Deleyto, 171-174.

proximate, since the camera is usually situated from behind one of the left or right shoulders of a given character as opposed to the precise position that is occupied by his/her eyes. In comparison to the use of eyeline matches, Yang seldom relies on shot/reverse shot sequences to bring us closer to the perspectives of his characters. Nevertheless, the term will be used later on to describe some of the editing sequences that are used in a particular bedroom scene in *Yi Yi*.

Moving on, techniques such as dissolves, fades, wipes, split screens, and superimpositions of shots also convey that two or more external and/or internal focalizers are temporarily present on-screen.² However, in spite of their widespread use in many contemporary films, Yang does not employ any of these popular techniques, and, instead, prefers to allow either the static camera frame or, alternatively, fluid camera movements (or a combination of both) to capture the depth of a given scene from a vantage point that is typically far removed from the positions of the characters. In addition, methods that are often used by film makers to achieve a total sense of internal focalization such as the perception shot (e.g. the blurred vision of a drunken character), or sequences containing dreams, fantasies or flashbacks are nearly absent from Yang's works.³ Nonetheless, we shall soon see that *Yi Yi* contains a dream sequence that is quite exemplary in highlighting, first, some of the ambiguities posed by the external-internal typologies of focalization; second, the value of the auto-focalization model, albeit only when it is related to other aspects of the narrative, most notably the film's dialogue, plot structure and themes; and, third, the ways in which pinpointing sources of narration become problematized by the film maker's approach to editing and plot construction. Above all, the key to understanding processes of focalization in the films of Yang, relies principally on examining the relationships among the pervasively external, distant gaze of his style of cinematography, his approach to mise-en-scene as well as the contributions of his actors in expressing character based experiences, particularly through their expressive,

² See Deleyto, 167-168.

³ The use of the fragment "a total sense of internal focalization" should be qualified here: as Deleyto points out, it is nearly impossible to exclusively internalize a given character's perspective in film as, for instance, the audience is constantly aware of the external focalizers that had preceded/proceeded its occurrence (See Deleyto, 167-171).

yet subtle forms of body language.

2. A Brief Synopsis of *A Confucian Confusion*

With this background in mind, let us move on to an examination of Yang's acclaimed film *A Confucian Confusion* in order to demonstrate how the preceding theoretical perspective is congruous with reality. For the benefit of my readers, it would first be helpful to provide a brief synopsis of this film's story and characters before launching into a detailed discussion of the ways in which Yang achieves multiple levels of focalization within it. On the whole, it is a satirical investigation into the political and artistic milieus of a modern Taiwanese society in which people are torn between "sentiment" or "affection" (情 *qing*), a value that is supposedly central to Confucian tradition, and money, an object of which is often considered to be the ideal attainment in a consumer society such as Taiwan. This film focuses on four young couples whose relationships could accurately be characterized as highly dysfunctional and unstable. On the surface, Xiaoming (Wang Weiming) and Qiqi (Shiang-chyi Chen) appear to be a perfect couple, in part, because their union was the product of a long term relationship that had originated in high school. Meanwhile, the wealthy couple of Akeem (Wang Bosen) and Molly (Suk Kwan Ni) are engaged to each other in order to satisfy their respective parents' desire to unify their families' vast fortunes. Then there is the former actress Feng (Richie Li) who, at the beginning of the film, works as a public relations representative for Akeem's company while she is also the mistress of a married man named Larry (Danny Deng) who serves as Akeem's business advisor and supposed confidante. There is also a separated couple that consists of Molly's sister (Chen Limei), a popular talk-show hostess, and her emotionally distraught writer husband (Yan Hongya), whom she married out of genuine love during her college years in spite of her family's strict opposition. Finally, the dramatic film director Birdie (Wang Yeming), who could be characterized as somewhat of a licentious clown, is the former classmate of Qiqi, Molly and Xiaoming. In addition, Qiqi who works for Molly's advertising agency, which is financially backed by Akeem, is best friends with her boss, while Xiaoming and Liren (Yiwen Chen), who work in the same government office as high-level civil servants, are also good buddies. Based on this brief outline of character relations, one

could easily tell that Yang's narratives are certainly complicated, to say the least.

Needless to say, by the conclusion of the film the dynamics of all of their relationships have dramatically changed: the idolized couple, Xiaoming and Qiqi, decide to separate, although it is not clear if this decision is entirely definitive; the arranged engagement between Akeem and Molly is nullified as a result of their own decision to do so; employer to employee relations are severed as the majority of the film's characters are either fired from their jobs or decide to quit; and, finally, the stability of what were once solid friendships between Qiqi and Molly as well as Xiaoming and Liren is put to the test and undermined to a nearly irreconcilable degree. Ultimately, although most of the characters experience degrees of amelioration by resolving some aspects of their mutual differences by the end of the film, the viewers are, nonetheless, left with an overwhelming feeling of ambiguity and insecurity over the post-filmic future of the protagonists' lives.

Of course, the preceding synopsis of this film's narrative is hardly exhaustive in that it excludes or glosses over certain elements, particularly in relation to some thematic considerations, that would greatly enhance and qualify one's understanding of the story and its characters. Nevertheless, what is partly important to keep in mind is that this film focuses on, above all, the breakdown, reparation and redefinition of familial, friendly and vocational relationships within the satirical context of a money-oriented society that has become morally bemused, if not bankrupt, as a result of its rapid consumerization combined with its self-imposed distortion or confusion of traditional values. At this time, given that Yang not only directed this film, but wrote its screenplay as well, perhaps it would be best to see how the thematic thrust of this work is described in his own words:

Like all the books on Chinese history we studied, over 2,500 years' worth, and most of the recent Chinese-language films that depict the past, poverty and sufferings are central themes. Wealth was never really intended for the people in Confucian doctrines, which enforced more than anything else the central authority's legitimacy with rigid social structures coated with moral justifications to stress conformism, discipline and personal sacrifices for social harmony and group security. Ironically, this conformism and discipline bore fruit to all these countries in their economic miracles and double-digit annual growths of the past two decades. Suddenly, as a result, we find ourselves in a position where we have

run out of Confucian teachings, as well as Western solutions such as Democracy, from which to model ourselves. We may know how to tell the world what to do, as with the human rights issues, but do we know how to tell ourselves what to do for our own future? This confusion has created ever threatening anxieties in all the details of our daily lives.⁴

3. The Use of the Long Shot and Camera Movement in Ambiguous Focalization

Now, we may discuss how the methods of camera movement, framing and mise-en-scene predominantly shape processes of external focalization in Yang's films and, in turn, reveal aspects of character based experience that we can infer, within reason, based on the performances of his actors. Here, it must be emphasized, once again, that despite the external location of the camera which might imply a false sense of neutral objectivity to the audience, the capacity for external focalization to yield additional information on the subjective experiences and thoughts of the characters, results paradoxically in a figurative form of internal focalization. This remains to be true even though the camera is often located far away from the positions of the characters (i.e. a long shot) in Yang's films. In his discussion on the cinematographic style of *Yi Yi*, Davin Lagerroos claims that, "...the film manages to convey nuances and details of the characters' lives quickly and succinctly through seemingly minor details and body language." Although the camera maintains a respectful distance from the story worlds of Yang's films, "the characters are full and rich and we are given great insight into them."⁵ Thus, throughout most segments of Yang's films focalization is consistently ambiguous, although to varying degrees depending on the precise qualities of a given scene.

Of course, one might argue that, based on this logic, all films (mainstream or otherwise) conform to this pattern of ambiguity, since the camera must always resort to externally focalized shots to anchor the audience's understanding of a film's characters,

⁴ Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Exiles in Modernity," *Chicago Reader*, para. 17
<<http://www.chicagoreader.com/movies/archives/1197/11077.html>> (1997). Note: the above quote is an excerpt selected from the interview portion of this article.

⁵ Davin Lagerroos, "Yi Yi," *Dual Lens*, para. 7
<<http://www.dualens.com/index.asp?reviewId=42803>> (2003).

events, plot structure and setting as well as the relationships that exist among these variables. However, most mainstream Hollywood films employ conventional structures of external focalization that transmit markedly clear-cut forms of information on a character's attitude and emotions, so much so that the surface appearance of his/her reactions to an object or situation convey very concrete, near-monolithic, character traits – as such, these films portray rather simple, one-sided characters, which, not surprisingly, forms the primary basis for the dismissal of these standardized works (by critics and others) due to their lack of artistic merit, creativity and authenticity. Much of the mundane simplicity that surrounds the overly-objective presentations of character persona that is achieved in these kinds of films is also highly dependent on the extent to which other forms of information are disclosed overtly through other aspects of a film narrative's structure, most notably through the development of a straight forward plot structure and linear time scheme.

While the story worlds of Yang's films generally conform to a linear time scheme, they do not, however, reveal plot structures that can be easily unravelled or deconstructed by any stretch of the imagination. Moreover, the application of cinematography in his films reflects a habit to place the camera at a considerably long distance from the characters, which produces a confusing sense of separation within the mind of the spectator. While this certainly undermines our task of gaining access to the thoughts of the protagonists, and while this might, in turn, suggest that focalization is altogether external in these cases, there are, nonetheless, a variety of other visual and/or aural cues that can disclose relevant information on character based subjectivity. These often subtle clues can usually be located in the more abstract elements of *mise-en-scene*, such as the mood that is conveyed through lighting and colours; the symbolic implications of key props; and/or the sublime expressions of body language, or, at least, those that can be detected, within reason, despite our distance from the action of the story world.

However, sometimes ambiguous focalization can be heightened through the capacity for camera movements, specifically tracking and zoom shots, to increase levels of focalization by guiding us to focus more squarely on one character, despite the external vantage point of the camera. While Yang and his cinematographers seldom use zoom shots (i.e. close-up shots) to bring us closer to an individual character, they often

rely on directional changes in smooth tracking shots to shift the audience's attention from one character to another, particularly in *A Confucian Confusion*. For example, the use of this technique occurs in one scene, shortly after Akeem realizes, under false pretences, that Molly is apparently having an affair with the acclaimed artist, Birdie. Against the wishes of his confidante, Larry, Akeem storms onto the television set where Birdie is taking a break following his interview on a popular entertainment talk show. At first, the camera mostly focuses on Akeem by tracking his movements while off-screen we can hear Birdie and Molly having a conversation. The external focalization (and auto-focalization) of Akeem's body language, which is clearly displayed in the centre of the frame, obviously indicates that he is a "walking time bomb" of rage that is set to explode at any given moment. After he confronts Birdie with a vibrant onslaught of sarcastic insinuations, he chases the artist around the television set in a comical way that is reminiscent of early slapstick humour, despite the apparent seriousness of the situation.

Throughout this segment, the camera continuously tracks Akeem while he is chasing his prey, but, once the camera frame becomes static, Molly comes into the foreground and begins to scream at a painfully high volume becoming almost entirely focalized for the remainder of the shot (roughly ten seconds). By instructing her to emerge into the foreground of the final portion of this scene, Yang wishes to shift the audience's attention away from Akeem's rage and divert it towards Molly's mounting frustration and anxiety over the general situation. At the end of this scene, it would be quite natural for viewers to forget temporarily about Akeem's pitiful jealousy as they would only be left with the powerful image of Molly clasp her ears with both hands while opening her mouth as widely as possible to bellow out a glass-shattering scream. Thus, we can see that, aside from camera movements, the film maker also manipulates the placement of actors to produce an ambiguity in focalization whereby we are revealed important information, almost simultaneously, on the mindsets of not just one, but several main characters in a given scene.

In parallel to this, we might say that character focalization is pervasively ambiguous throughout the duration of Yang's films, because he attempts to grant his protagonists roughly equivalent degrees of significance in terms of the centrality of their roles within the plot structures of his stories, regardless of how often they may or may not be featured on-screen. For the most part, this is because his characters develop or

maintain fairly close relationships with one another on the basis of blood ties, friendship, romance, or mutual interests – or, conversely, because they are enemies who must interact with each other through conflict to achieve their opposite goals. As a result, even those protagonists who are not granted much screen time eventually perform an action that is crucial to the development of the plot structure, one that would certainly have an impact on one or more of the other characters who inhabit the story worlds of Yang's films. As Danny Lagerroos observes, "It is hard to think of a scene one could eliminate without doing a disservice to our understanding of one of the characters or the movie [*Yi Yi*] as a whole."⁶ Indeed, one could easily arrive at the same conclusion about the functions of the main characters in all of Yang's films.

That aside, the previously described scene, on the whole, reflects two major features of Yang's approach to focalization. First, he often employs complicated sequences of tracking shots in order to shift the viewer's focus from one character to another and reveal their emotional states while, compared to other characters, they dominate the space within the frame for only brief moments of time. It is quite reasonable to contend that these kinds of scenes reflect occurrences of ambiguous focalization given that the camera acts as an external focalizer by framing their visual contents, while the emotional and psychological states of particular characters are simultaneously brought to light through externalized manifestations of their behaviour. Here, we can see how auto-focalization could come to our aid by emphasizing the meanings that are transmitted through the body language of the featured characters, while avoiding the connotations of so-called objectivity that are implied by the term external focalization, given that we are granted temporary access to the subjective realms of the protagonists' emotional experiences, but from a position that is external to their perspectives. Second, tied in to this method of character focalization is Yang's desire to disclose and hide, often simultaneously, pieces of information that are relevant to the development of the film's narrative. Perhaps it would be even more accurate to argue that Yang frequently wishes to redefine the audience's understanding of the characters' relationships by shifting degrees of character focalization in these tracking shots, thereby exposing more information about the true (or false) nature of their intentions towards one another.

⁶ Ibid.

4. Framing and Mise-en-scene as a Vehicle for Ambiguous Focalization

Aside from tracking shots, Yang also manipulates the use of framing and mise-en-scene in this film by allowing the camera to remain in a fixed position while the characters' erratic movements from on-screen to off-screen spaces take place within a shot. It would be helpful to clarify that the term framing mostly refers to the amount of space that a director chooses to include in a given scene and this decision will obviously have an inevitable impact on the spatial relationships that exist between the positions of the characters, objects and camera, respectively. On this issue, Chatman notes that, "Angle, distance, and so on are controlled by the director's placement of the camera. Life offers no predetermined rationale for these placements. They are all choices, that is, products of the art of the director."⁷

In some scenes, by temporarily excluding characters from the frame by moving them off-screen, Yang adds another factor to the equation of camera positioning and actor movement in achieving focalization. For example, Feng and Larry have just entered her apartment and are getting undressed while engaging in a conversation that centres on their suspicion towards one another's love affairs. At one point in the scene, they are physically separated: Larry is featured in the foreground unbuttoning his shirt in her bedroom, while Feng is located in the bathroom behind a closed door which is clearly visible in the background of the shot. As soon as Feng enters the bathroom and shuts the door she begins to question Larry about the nature of his relationship with her former boss Molly. She warns Larry that, "Molly's no little league, you dig? If you did make a play for her, besides firing me, she'd be on your ass. Probably she'll trap you in her car, grill you about me. Of course, you'd deny [it]. She'd just kick you out of the car."

It is most probable that Yang decided to separate these characters and only feature Larry in the frame for about 30 seconds in order to heighten the auto-focalization of his emotional response, as expressed through body language, to Feng's cautionary words. Throughout this brief portion of the scene, Larry's frowns, posture and eye movements make it clear that he is becoming increasingly uncomfortable and alarmed, especially after he realizes that Feng's hypothetical description of how Molly might choose to punish him for his unfaithfulness bears an uncanny resemblance to what had really

⁷ Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, 98.

happened to him on that very day – indeed, Molly had trapped him in her car, grilled him about Feng and then kicked him out in a very devious way. Thus, in this shot we can see another subtle method in which Yang manipulates *mise-en-scene* to alter degrees of character focalization by shifting the audience's attention from character to character. For about 30 seconds, the audience can feel closer to Larry's quiet, yet visible sense of humiliation, although it is not likely that the vast majority of viewer's would feel any sympathy towards him given his questionable moral behaviour. Nonetheless, the realistic portrayal of Larry's body language, the positioning of the camera frame and the manipulation of the compartmentalized spaces of the cramped apartment serve well to increase our understanding of his precise reactions to Feng's calculated warnings.

However, following this brief moment of embarrassment for Larry, our focus is shifted back towards Feng, in part, because we have suddenly come to realize that, despite her faults, she is quite clever, cunning, perceptive and even wise. In fact, this pattern of spatial fluctuation between the characters continues throughout the scene as their dialogue unfolds and Feng exposes more secrets about Molly. At different moments, both characters move respectively in and out of the foreground and background (or on-screen and off-screen) causing a sudden shift in the poles of focalization. At times, we are revealed more about Larry's sense of embarrassment over Feng's keen insight into Molly's behaviour and near the end of the conversation we can even see his twisted elation, as indicated by his malicious grimaces, over Feng's proposal on how to manipulate the relationship between Molly and her fiancé in order to maintain a good standing with Akeem as a trustworthy confidante and employee.

Overall, the shifts in focalization that take place in this scene are employed to fulfil two purposes: firstly, Yang wishes to convey a realistic scene - it is certainly not unusual for people to move from room to room in their homesteads while conversing with one another; secondly and more importantly, by respectively isolating their presence on-screen for brief moments, exploiting their relative proximity to the camera and relying on the talents of the actors, the director wants to auto-focalize emphatically the emotional reactions of each character to their piecemeal exchange of dialogue and, in doing so, push the viewers into frequently shifting their attention back and forth between the characters. In this case, it would not be a stretch to argue that the underlying patterns of movement that emerge from the characters' actions resemble a balance scale – in other words, the

undulations of the characters moving back and forth from the background to foreground or from on-screen to off-screen locations are inversely proportional to one another; likewise, the fluctuations in character focalization that occur also follow this formula. This kind of flux in focalization reoccurs frequently throughout various other scenes of the film, so much so that it would be redundant to analyse further examples. That said, it is important to bear in mind that, aside from tracking shots, the film maker's approach to framing and mise-en-scene can also produce a strong sense of ambiguous focalization in many scenes of his films. More importantly, this condition of ambiguity compels us to apply a method of interpretation, along the lines of auto-focalization, that would guide us towards isolating the cues that are reflected by the physical behaviour of a character in mapping out his/her reactions, thoughts and emotions. It must be emphasized that, conversely, applying the term external focalization to an analysis of this kind of scene would, by default, carry paradoxical implications, since we are permitted to learn so much about the character's mental and emotional conditions, which are supposedly internal to their own subjective experiences, but from a purely external vantage point. However, the information that is conveyed through the facial expressions and body language of the actors, as rich as it might be, could not be readily qualified nor truly meaningful unless we relate these factors to the immediate context of the characters' dialogue along with previous instances of character based interaction – in this case, it was necessary to anchor our interpretation of the scene, in part, by referring to the prior exchange that had taken place between Molly and Larry in her car. Here, we can see how auto-focalized shots should not be viewed in isolation from the broader contexts of dialogue and plot development when analyzing a given film scene.

5. The Role of Technology and its Twofold Purpose: Empowerment and Enslavement

Thus, we can now focus on another aspect of mise-en-scene that, despite its subtlety, also serves as a powerful vehicle for the auto-focalization of the character's attitudes, personalities and attitudes in this film: the use of props or, more specifically, technological devices to flesh out the psychological mindset and behaviour of the characters. Similar to the important role of Kane's childhood toy, Rosebud the sleigh, in symbolizing so much about his psychological predispositions in Orson Welles' *Citizen*

Kane (1941), the items possessed by many of the characters in *A Confucian Confusion* serve well to auto-focalize significant information on their personalities and temperaments. As Tonglin Lu notes, each of three female protagonists, Qiqi, Molly and Feng, are often associated with a technological prop in this film.⁸ Qiqi is constantly shown with her cellular phone, which either acts as a vehicle for empowerment when it is in her possession or contributes to her loss of self-control when she misplaces or drops it.

For example, in one scene that takes place in the popular restaurant TGI Friday's, when she spots Xiaoming through the eatery's window, she hurriedly runs outside and accidentally drops her phone. In the following scene, we can witness her rapid loss of self-composure when she gets into a shouting match with Xiaoming over their dinner plans with his relatives, her relationship with Molly, and her career prospects. The image of Qiqi yelling at her husband seems to be highly uncharacteristic of her given that she usually appears to be so soft-spoken, mild mannered and reserved throughout most of the film. However, further evidence of her potential instability is revealed later on when we discover that she forgets her mobile phone at a writer's bohemian style apartment. When she returns to fetch it, the writer mistakenly believes that she had left her phone behind to serve as an excuse to initiate a romantic relationship with him. This misunderstanding results in an awkward moment in which the writer pursues Qiqi down the staircase of his apartment building while, in an effort to brush him off, she repeatedly confirms that she simply wished to pick up her phone as she runs towards the exit. On the whole, Qiqi's mobile phone serves as a filter for the expression and symbolization of her feelings, to the extent that it virtually acts as an extension of her body and psyche.

Meanwhile, Molly is often associated with her black Porsche sports car, which, as a material representation of her privileged financial situation and high social status, instils her with a great deal of confidence, arrogance and self-superiority when she is behind the wheel. On several occasions in this film, she stages intimate discussions with her partners, all of which rapidly spiral out of control by transforming into heated arguments that are almost exclusively guided by her careful manipulation of the conversation. As previously mentioned, in one scene, after leaving work, Larry spots Molly standing

⁸ Tonglin Lu, *Confronting Modernity in the Cinemas of Taiwan and Mainland China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 147-48.

beside her stylish Porsche outside of his office building. After cutting to the next shot in which Molly is driving her car alongside Larry, in an apparently sweet sounding tone of voice, Larry tells her that he was deeply moved by a previous discussion that they had shared regarding Molly's financial woes. However, it quickly becomes clear that Molly is fairly suspicious towards the authenticity of Larry's sentiments. She interjects by telling Larry that she had fired Feng earlier that day. After Larry reacts rather uncomfortably to this news, Molly proceeds to grill him on the nature of his relationship with Feng and it becomes quite obvious that Larry feels extremely awkward and embarrassed given that he is ill prepared to cover up for his past sexual transgressions. In a subsequent scene that clearly bears a chronological connection to the one that was just described, Molly leaves Larry stranded at a gas station by unexpectedly "ditching" him there. After he gets out of the car to fill it up with gas upon Molly's request, she immediately drives away with a smug sense of satisfaction, while he is left there bewildered and humiliated. Aside from this, there are other car scenes that feature Molly as a commanding and manipulative figure, such as when she toys with the emotions of both Birdie and Akeem near the end of the film.

Finally, there is Feng who seems to be in a never ending process of searching for her contact lenses and wiping her sensitive eyes, an excuse of which is used to cover up her tears of sadness. For example, when Xiaoming encounters her outside of a nightclub, she is wiping her eyes and claims to have lost her contact lenses. In reality, it is clear that she is wiping the tears from her eyes that resulted from her profound sadness over the immediate loss of her job. The notion that Feng is lying becomes confirmed in a subsequent scene in which she has no trouble spotting Larry in the darkness while Xiaoming is escorting her back to her apartment. Her prior deceit becomes even more evident if we consider that she was able to see Larry long before the two men were able to notice each other's presence. Thus, her contact lenses, which are essentially invisible to everyone but herself, serve as a powerful means to deceive her potential sexual partners and prevent them from seeing through her elaborate charades. At one point, they even represent her apparent sense of innocence – during her sexually charged job interview with Birdie, he compares her to "a lovely little girl lost in the big city" when she apparently loses her lenses once again. Hence, in an ironic twist, Feng's ocular inadequacy acts as an instrument of empowerment by allowing her to manipulate other

characters' perceptions of her feelings and personality.

On the whole, Qiqi's mobile phone, Molly's sleek sports car and Feng's contact lenses could be viewed as vital extensions of their personalities and, therefore, serve as technological vehicles that enhance our understanding of these character's thoughts, motives and actions vis-à-vis auto-focalization. In other words, these props reflect another way in which Yang uses some aspects of mise-en-scene to represent and, therefore, temporarily auto-focalize particular characters and their psychological mindsets. If we had applied Deleuto's notion of external focalization to an analysis of these scenes we may have altogether overlooked the signification of these material symbols, since such an approach would centre our attention principally upon the gaze of the camera, its movements, and its distance from the characters, elements of which are entirely external to those which are contained within the mise-en-scene of this (or any) film. This particular shortcoming of Deleuto's model becomes all the more evident if we consider that he ignores the role of props in his discussion of focalization theory along with his application of it to numerous film case studies – in fact, he only mentions the term mise-en-scene itself in a handful of sentences and seems to situate its role outside of the theoretical scope of focalization.

Setting this contention aside from now, in Yang's earlier film *The Terrorizer*, technological devices often attached to the urban milieu, including cameras, telephones and guns, also serve as an extension or expression of certain aspects of the characters' personalities featured in that film. Furthermore, we shall see later in our discussion of *Yi Yi* that a camera becomes an extremely important tool to the young boy, Yang-Yang, in his philosophical quest to help people by providing them with perspectives on reality that they could not normally achieve themselves. On the issue of character centred props, Jameson states that the mindsets of Yang's protagonists have been profoundly influenced by, "the various forms which reification and commodification and the corporate standardizations of media society imprint on human subjectivity and existential experience."⁹ In other words, for whatever reasons, these characters have attempted to compensate for some kind of an existential or psychological crisis in their lives through their increasing identification with the technological goods that have been so vigorously

⁹ Jameson, 131.

promoted within the dominating media and corporate environment that surrounds them. Hence, it is certainly not an exaggeration to claim that the predominance of technological devices in Yang's films does illuminate particular aspects of his characters' personalities and is therefore a significant variable, among others, within processes of auto-focalization.

6. The Reoccurring Window Motif

However, there is yet another prop that Yang uses to qualify the style of focalization, character based or otherwise, that occurs in *A Confucian Confusion*, but, in this case, it does not really act as a reflection of any of the film's characters since it does not belong to any of them, *per se*. As Lu points out, upon viewing this film, one must be struck by the high number of scenes in which the space between characters and the camera is constantly obstructed by windowpanes of various shapes, sizes and styles.¹⁰ In both of the scenes that feature Molly's Porsche, it would be extremely difficult to overlook the presence of its windshield, which is always situated between the camera and the characters located inside the car. In another scene, Xiaoming arrives home and removes his footwear on the porch of his family's apartment. It is clear that the camera is placed outside relatively close to his position on the porch. However, even though Xiaoming enters his home and engages in a conversation with his parents, the camera remains outside and frames the shot by viewing them through the latticework that covers their yellow and green tinted windows.

Once again, Yang uses this reoccurring window motif to frame portions of his shots and obstruct the audience's vision, but to what end? Part of the purpose of using such a device may be to push audience members into experiencing a sense of voyeurism, as if they were "peeping Toms" who had just happened to stumble upon what appears to be a typical family scene. Using windows as our primary looking glass, aside from the camera, also creates a sense of separation between the viewers and the characters of the film and, in turn, may widen the gap between the degrees of external and internal focalization that occur in such scenes. In other words, it may be more difficult to interpret

¹⁰ Lu, 145.

the body language and emotional states of the characters given the obstruction of the window, its latticework, and coloured tinting. Conversely, using a window as an additional method of framing might also increase our closeness to the action of the story world, by producing a natural frame within the artificial boundaries of the camera that would imply a greater limitation of space and, therefore, allow us to focus more easily on the featured protagonists. However, this process is frequently undermined in many of the scenes of *A Confucian Confusion* largely due to the distancing of the camera and the various physical objects that lie within the natural frame, whether it is a window, a doorway or otherwise. On the whole, it is quite arguable that many of the film's characters are featured through colour-tinted windows that are obstructed by bars or lattice work in order to auto-focalize the inauthentic nature of the protagonists' sentiments vis-à-vis the symbolism of the distorted surface imagery that is conveyed in such scenes.

There is yet another scene in which windows are featured prominently, albeit they do not obstruct our field of vision or separate the characters from the camera. In this scene, Xiaoming's manager describes the rapid success and development of Taipei's modernization, while gazing out of his office window at a high-rise construction site that is situated in front of a row of other tall buildings in the background. While the well kept office manager who adorns a finely pressed business suit and neatly combed hair peers out of the clean glass window, one can imagine the chaotic noise pollution that might be generated by the operation of the large-scale construction machinery that is located at the site. It could be argued that in this scene the line between external and internal focalizers becomes blurred, as we can see exactly what the manager sees, albeit from a slightly different angle – by extension, it could be argued that this is the only example of an eyeline match that we can see in the entire film, although such an understanding would require us to stretch the definition of the term given that there are no cuts to the construction site.

Regardless, the image of him viewing all of this through a windowpane could be regarded as significant in auto-focalizing the sense of compartmentalization and isolation that is arguably felt by the characters as a result of Taiwan's rapid modernization process. This interpretation is also shared by Lu who notes that, "the glass reinforces the impression of isolation – as if an invisible wall were separating people from each

other.”¹¹ This brings to mind the scenes in which couples such as Xiaoming and Qiqi or Feng and Larry see each other through the glass windows of the restaurant TGI Friday’s, especially when we view these images of physical isolation as a symbol of the emotional separation that occurs between them, respectively, throughout the film. Thus, windowpanes represent another aspect of mise-en-scene that contributes to processes of auto-focalization and enhances our knowledge of the characters’ perspectives, albeit indirectly, by alluding to their extreme distance from one another in terms of their emotional ties. Aside from all of these examples, there are numerous shots in which we can see panoramic views of the urban sprawl of downtown Taipei through the large windows of Akeem’s company, while characters engage in dialogue in the foreground – these moments sublimely remind us of the chaotic urban environment that frames the past and present lives of the characters.

7. Absences of Focalization: Effaced Intrusions on the Film Text and Meta-Narration

The above discussions of the symbolic implications that are manifested through props might ultimately relate to what is perhaps this film’s highest form of narration and thematization, or what I had referred to as meta-narration in the introductory section of this thesis. Before we explore this aspect of the film narrative, it would be prudent to discuss another limitation that is reflected by the application of focalization theory to film. Deleyto argues that, “At a textual level, the focaliser always occupies the position of the camera,”¹² and as we know, the focalizer can be qualified as external or internal depending on whether he/she exists either inside or outside of the time and space of the story world. However, how can we qualify the focalizer if he/she presents information that is clearly not situated in the story world? For example, silent films of the early 20th century constantly relied on inter-titles as a form of narration that could guide the audience’s understanding of a story’s plot, setting and characters through brief written cues that would usually convey fairly straight forward information. Of course, it is obvious that devices such as inter-titles are not located within the story world, but reflect

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Deleyto, 167.

an intervention on behalf of an extra-diegetic narrator or, as some might argue, an implied author who wishes to provide explicit commentary on some aspects of the story world. Given that the label external focalization can only be rendered meaningful in relation to its dialectical opposite, internal focalization, I fail to see how either of these categories could account for interventions, such as inter-titles, that temporarily displace the spatial continuity of the story world by referring our attention to an object that is altogether external to its reality. Nor can auto-focalization be used to improve our understanding of these marked intrusions (as the authors would surely admit) given that it is concerned principally with the surface imagery of objects, including characters, that occupy the “here and now” of the story world.

All of this appears to undermine the confident assertion of both Bal and Deleyto that information is always focalized in a narrative, regardless of the spatial position of the focalizer – or does it? In *A Confucian Confusion*, puzzling inter-titles are frequently deployed to distinguish between different portions of the narrative, not unlike the use of chapter headings in written texts. Many of these are presented as if they were Confucian proverbs, but their often humorous, satirical and/or superficial content clearly indicates that they stem from an agent who, in his/her lack of wisdom and sincerity, might be regarded as the polar opposite of the true “sage king.” Consider the following example, which is used as the introductory title to the film:

Confucius: The city is too crowded.

Disciples: What can we do about it?

Confucius: Make the people rich.

Disciples: What comes next, after they are made rich?

Two thousand years of poverty and struggles later, it took a city named Taipei just twenty years to become one of the wealthiest cities in the world.

What is striking about the dialogue portion of this title is that it presents Confucius as a figure who truly advocated material success for the masses, which is certainly not the case according to contemporary understandings of Confucian thought and scholarship. Clearly, this introductory title provides clues to the spectator on the thematic content and characters of the story, but, in all likelihood, he/she could not possibly understand its full range of implications until the end of the film or upon subsequent viewings. The last

question that is posed by the disciples (“What comes next, after they are made rich?”) essentially refers to the uncertainty and immorality to which all of the characters of *A Confucian Confusion* fall victim, albeit in different ways. All of the characters are able to maintain a comfortable, if not excessive lifestyle due to the various social, economic and political opportunities that are afforded to them as a result of Taiwan’s successful approach to rapid modernization, and yet they are all faced with various problems that revolve around their inability to be direct and sincere with one another in their relationships. Consequently, all of them are severely dissatisfied with the circumstances that they face in their lives. As mentioned by Yang himself in interview, the film is, above all, concerned with the incongruity between a society that, on the surface, wishes to maintain its traditional Confucian values, while embracing modernity, capitalism and materialism all at the same time. By now, it should be clear that this thematic consideration becomes all the more accurate and convincing, if we relate the content of the introductory title to the characters, dialogue and plot development of the overall film narrative.

However, could we regard this as a manifestation of external focalization? While this form of intervention could be seen as external focalization since an agent that is external to the story world is focalizing something, the object that he/she is focalizing is also completely separate from that realm, which would seem to undermine the necessity to attach the qualifying label of external to the term in the first place, given that our connection to its essential other, the internal, is temporarily severed by the inclusion of the introductory title. If we are willing to call this external focalization as well, then we must admit that there is more than just one mode of external focalization, which would seem to undermine the applicability and accuracy of the term itself and, therefore, indicate a need to develop a new means of classification. Moreover, there are other inter-titles included in the film that seem to breach the membrane between the external and internal to such a degree that we must question if they, in fact, reflect concepts and themes of which the characters themselves are fully aware.

In fact, there is a sequence at the end of the film that not only problematizes the distinction between the external and internal typologies through the deployment of an inter-title, but blurs the lines between focalization and narration as well. The scene opens with a static shot of Molly and Xiaoming lying in bed in a hotel room, after having an

unexpected sexual affair with one another. At first, Molly appears to be more calm and content than at any other moment in the film, but her cheerful mood suddenly becomes sour when Ming refuses to acknowledge that he loves her. This is not because he had sought to take advantage of her in the first place, but, on the contrary, due to his genuine desire to avoid hurting her by declaring something that might not be true, especially since they had just engaged in an affair for the first time ever. Not surprisingly, Molly becomes quite upset, accuses him of being a chauvinist playboy and then criticizes him for attempting to moralize at a time when he himself had engaged in adultery, given that he is still legally married to Qiqi. Furthermore, she implies that their affair was not so much about a feeling of mutual attraction, but was instead representative of his attempt to suppress his feelings of attachment towards Qiqi, one that had backfired and produced the opposite affect, according to her. In turn, he effectively accuses her of the same brand of immorality when he asks, “Isn’t Akeem your problem?” to which she replies, “Our relationship is normal! Where’s the problem?”

After Molly leaves the room in a fit of frustration, Xiaoming becomes remarkably self-reflexive as he poses a series of profound questions and statements that are clearly about much more than just ethical issues surrounding love and adultery:

Sure, normal. It must be love for we’ve slept together, that’s normal. Find a steady job to lead a secured life, that’s normal. Let’s set up Liren and ruin him, he’s not normal. My dad went to jail, that makes him an asshole. Boxer’s unrest, the Cultural Revolution, Tiananmen, a unified China – all are normal!

What is important to note, here, is that after the third line of this soft-spoken monologue the camera cuts to an inter-title that displays the remainder of his statements one by one, with small sized yellow text on a black background, and, in effect, Xiaoming temporarily serves as a voice-over narrator. Although we are cut off from viewing him in the story world, we can, nonetheless, continue to focus on his reflections as manifested through his own voice, tones and inflections; thus, the external focalization of his monologue is still maintained, albeit strictly in an aural sense. At the same time, the inclusion of the inter-titles serves well to focus our attention exclusively on the statements themselves and, by extension, the thematic implications that are suggested by these, which, I would argue, are principally concerned with the forms of cognitive dissonance that occur when

markedly immoral forms of behaviour become normalized through political rhetoric, educational propaganda, social decay and our failure to admit that such corrupt conditions might really exist in our contemporary world, a problem of which is all tied to the consciousness of the characters in this film.

Setting the thematic content aside, this sequence places the functions of both narration and focalization under a shroud of ambiguity in so far as it maintains a complete sense of aural continuity, which keeps the focus of our attention on Xiaoming's "stream of consciousness" monologue, while, paradoxically enough, it simultaneously destroys any form of visual continuity by allowing the inter-title to completely dominate the frame halfway through his reflections. While I agree that the inter-title certainly represents an intervention on behalf of a higher source of narration, it is difficult to determine whether or not we could also regard Xiaoming as a narrating agent, in part, due to the sudden shift to voice-over narration. More importantly, we know that these statements ultimately belong to Xiaoming due to the scene's specific sequence of shots, and, therefore, we cannot regard the inclusion of the inter-title as a form of extra-diegetic commentary, other than in its capacity to perform an emphatic function by reducing the complex visual array of the hotel scene all the way down to a simple combination of monochrome words. As a result of these conflicting, yet complimentary affects, one is left with a sense of confusion over exactly who or what is performing the primary function of narration in this scene. It is moments such as these, ones in which we are permitted to learn more about the mentality of the characters along with the social context that surrounds them, that cannot be categorized according to the terms of the focalization models that have been presented in this thesis.

Part II – Focalization in *Yi Yi*

1. A Brief Synopsis of *Yi Yi*

In many ways, *Yi Yi* represents a considerable departure in style for Edward Yang, as it does not directly focus on the themes of political and economic corruption that were so evident in films such as *A Confucian Confusion*. During an interview in 2000, the director claimed that he desired to tell a simpler story through *Yi Yi*, one that was centred on the trials and tribulations of a contemporary family, as opposed to the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of a modern society at large. While family drama is a popular subject for many Taiwanese and Chinese film makers, Yang had chosen to downplay its role as a central theme, that is, until the creation of *Yi Yi*. According to him:

It's basically a story about people. This time it's not about city life or what's going on in Taipei. It's about human beings, about some simple lives. I've focused on things that happen to a family, about how the individual members react and respond to things that happen to the others. It's a simple slice of life from the 20th century.¹³

Here, I suspect that Yang is attempting to be rather modest in describing his pinnacle work as just “a simple slice of life,” for many could argue that the philosophical implications of *Yi Yi* are far more complex, profound and engaging than is the case in any of his other films. In fact, I believe that the unprecedented success of this movie is, in large part, due to the overall lack of pretension that is reflected through its sublime modes of story telling, character development and cinematography. Nevertheless, the film is, above all, centred on existential problems that have plagued humankind since the dawn of time, most notably our inability to comprehend truly the intra-subjective experiences of others. Yang claims:

¹³ Richard James Havis, “Yi Yi,” *Cannes 2000*, para. 2,
<http://www.filmfestivals.com/cannes_2000/official/yiyius.htm> (2000).

I chose the family unit because every character has to be a different age, so it allowed me to easily explore a number of different lives and situations. Then I realised that all these lives are interactive. Each life is inextricably linked with all the lives around it. In the wider sense, that's how the world holds together.¹⁴

In essence, the film focuses on the individual lives of family members who, for the most part, are far too self-absorbed with their own personal problems, petty or otherwise, to allow themselves to understand one another in a truly meaningful way. In fact, many of the characters reflect a hopeless inability to rise above the confines of their own modes of narrow mindedness and self-denial, so much so, in some cases, that they are altogether unable to realize their own guilt and complicity in creating the crises that surround them.

That said, most of the characters should command a great deal of sympathy from the audience, as their lives are filled with the kinds of follies that are shared by all humans, regardless of age or cultural background, while their colourful personalities often exhibit a variety of positive traits. Despite the film's pessimistic undertones, it unobtrusively relates a markedly optimistic message to its viewers: according to Yang, "The film is my observation, indeed, my belief that everyone in the world is equal. It's a kind of idealism. But I put it in a very human way. It's not too deep or philosophical."¹⁵ As a side note, I would like to urge my readers to consider Yang's conviction of equality for all and the ways in which this parallels a statement that was made in an earlier section of this paper – that is, the pervasive tendency of Yang to grant equal weight to the roles of each of his characters in the development of a story, regardless of how often or not they appear on-screen.

Much like *A Confucian Confusion*, the plot of *Yi Yi* is appropriately dense, with multiple layers of interwoven story lines. The father, NJ (Wu Nian-jen) is a partner in a computer company that is in the midst of an overhaul due its failure to produce innovative products. The pressure over the dire state of his company is only compounded when he is suddenly confronted by an old flame, Sherry (Ko Su-yun), who demands an

¹⁴ Ibid., para. 3.

¹⁵ Ibid., para. 6.

explanation for why he had suddenly left her over 30 years ago. While both of them catch up with each other during a trip to Tokyo, midway in the film, it becomes clear that she desperately wants to resume their relationship, which tests the moral fibre and emotional fortitude of a man who is genuinely honest, loving and responsible towards his family. NJ's wife, Min-Min (Elaine Jin), is a career woman who, despite her success, feels an overbearing sense of malaise that constantly undermines her ability to nurture her family and take care of herself, particularly when her mother, the Grandma (Tang Ru-yun), becomes critically ill and bed ridden at home. In response to her failure to confront the crisis, she attempts to find solace at a Buddhist retreat that is, in fact, far more concerned with profits rather than spiritual affairs.

Meanwhile, their 15-year-old daughter, Ting-Ting (Kelly Lee), experiences her own problems when she becomes involved in what appears to be an innocent, bitter-sweet romance with her neighbour's ex-boyfriend (Yu Pang Chang). However, what she does not realize until the end of the film, is that she has unknowingly entered into a sordid love triangle that results in a tragic murder. The fact that she is unable to sleep at night since she blames herself for her grandmother's stroke, only complicates matters more so for her. Meanwhile, after being relentlessly bullied by the older girls at school, the 8-year-old son, Yang-Yang (Jonathan Chang), is trying to work through the cruel realities of childhood by taking up photography as a means towards greater understanding and creativity. Similar to his sister, he also has a coming-of-age experience that revolves around his discovery of love and sexuality, albeit under circumstances that are far more innocent and benign. Finally, there is Min-Min's foolish brother, A-Di (Chen Hsi-sheng), who marries Xiao Yan (Hsiao Shu-shen) at the beginning of the movie. Quite soon, we realize that he is in a state of financial ruin due to his extravagant lifestyle and failure to make sound investments, while it is also revealed that he may not be the most faithful of husbands.

Similar to *A Confucian Confusion*, while most of the central characters achieve some degrees of amelioration by the end of the film, their affairs ultimately remain shrouded in a veil of ambiguity and, as such, the protagonists must simply move on with the task of living. Nevertheless, the subtle, yet profound insights that are yielded to them by undergoing such difficult experiences push them slightly closer towards a genuine understanding of themselves and how they should relate to one another. This is achieved,

above all, through their interactions with each other, many of which appear initially to be irrelevant, but are, in fact, of great importance, as revealed by the end of the film. Thus, one might say that the film closes with a sublime undertone of cautious optimism that would seem to suggest that our ability to understand ourselves can only be realized by interacting with others and making earnest efforts to appreciate their unique perspectives.

2. Shifts in Focalization, Indirect Narration and Continuity Editing: Weaving Together Divergent Story Lines

In our discussion of *A Confucian Confusion*, it was noted that the camera alternates between framing open and closed spaces, particularly in indoor environments, such as in the scene that featured Larry and Feng having a suspicious conversation before bed. The spatial orientation of that film's cinematography often produces a distinct form of atmosphere: the shots that present a marked sense of limitation and separation in spatial relations inspire a heightened, yet subtle feeling of anxiety, tension, isolation and unknowing within the minds of viewers. The same pattern could also be attributed to the presentation of urban spaces in most of Yang's other works – *The Terrorizer* and *Mahjong* are quite exemplary of this intriguing approach to the manipulation of spatial relations. Likewise, in several scenes that are dispersed throughout the overall duration of *Yi Yi*, the framing of urban dwelling spaces, particularly apartments and studios, depicts a domestic environment in which characters frequently talk, or even bark, at each other through walls or closed doors. At times, we are permitted to hear muffled conversations seep through the walls of a character's bedroom, while he/she attempts to find some measure of privacy and solitude from the problems that surround him/her in the outside world. In some of these scenes, "Yang, with his lengthy takes, lets us share the space with the characters thus enabling us to relate to the loneliness and frustrations of their lives."¹⁶

At the same time, one of the most interesting affects that is achieved through this manipulation of character placement and spatial relations, centres on the noticeable separation between aspects of sight and sound that often produces a degree of perceptual

¹⁶ Matt Langdon, "Yi Yi," *Montage*, para. 7,

<<http://www.geocities.com/mattl66/yiyi.html>> (2003).

tension and bemusement within the cognitive faculties of the viewer. In many instances, we are forced to focus our eyesight exclusively on one character, especially when he/she appears to manifest a strong reaction to a new situation, while we are simultaneously pushed to concentrate our ears on the dialogue of another character that is usually located much farther away from the camera, usually in an off-screen position. In other words, we are only allowed to see, but not hear one character; hear, but not see another character, often for extremely long periods of time. At this point, there is no need to outline any of these scenes in detail, since they produce affects that are largely similar to those achieved in *A Confucian Confusion*.

That aside, the film makers do rely on other methods, most notably editing, to produce a troubling conflict between aspects of sight and sound within the mind of the spectator. In one scene, we see A-Di's pregnant wife, Xiao Yan, lying in a hospital bed while excitedly observing the ultrasound image of her unborn baby. During this shot, although it is clear that she is talking to her husband, we are not able to hear what she says, because the soundtrack is only playing the rhythmic thumps of the baby's heartbeat as well as a voice-over dialogue that is tied to the next scene, as we soon discover. Shortly after the effaced voice-over narration commences, the camera cuts to a static shot that exclusively features the baby's x-ray image displayed on the ultrasound monitor as if we were seeing things through Xiao Yan's own eyes. As we watch the infant squirm around his mother's womb, the voice-over dialogue introduces a variety of rather profound philosophical statements as follows: "It begins to acquire signs of human life. It begins to think, then matures into a living entity and becomes our most devoted companion." Obviously, the content of this voice-over dialogue is quite appropriate and complimentary given that Xiao Yan is able to see the early development of her child through the benefits of the hospital's modern technology.

However, the following lines presented by the voice-over narrator establish a marked twist in the unfolding of her dialogue as she surprisingly states, "That's the limitless future for computer games. We haven't yet surpassed fighting and killing games, not because we haven't fully understood computers, but because we haven't fully understood ourselves [as] human beings." This provocative presentation of conflicting sights and sounds becomes justified when the following cut indicates that the entire sequence is deployed as a means to segue smoothly into the following scene – that is, it

acts as a useful technique of *continuity editing*. At the end of the effaced dialogue, the camera cuts to a scene in which NJ, Da-Da and other associates are having a business meeting with Ota, the Japanese game designer, and his female translator, the latter of whom we come to realize had just served as the voice-over narrator. Hence, we can see how the deployment of just a simple eyeline match sequence can become coloured and nuanced by the inclusion of a voice-over dialogue that originates from a figure that belongs to a separate time and place.

The segue portion of this scene reflects a marked conflict between elements of internal and external focalization, in both the visual and aural implications of the term, in so far as we are permitted to see what Xiao Yan sees, and yet we are forced to hear a seemingly detached segment of directly unrelated dialogue. In terms of the visual elements of the first shot, auto-focalization could serve well to shift our attention to Xiao Yan's indicative facial expressions - her beaming smiles and rapid blinks realistically convey a level of joy and excitement that only a young mother could have upon seeing her infant for the first time. Furthermore, I believe that auto-focalization can assist our analysis of the long still shot of the ultrasound monitor, particularly in revealing more of the nuances that surround the style of narration and thematization in this film. In a sense, there is something altogether unnatural about the visual abstractions that are produced by the black and white squiggles that come to form the overall graphic of the prenatal child, much like the imagery that we might find in some computer games. Nevertheless, any adult viewers would immediately recognize this as an ultrasound image, even if the shot was presented independently from the film's context and, therefore, would instantly see this as a representation of a real living entity that is acquiring signs of human life. However, we could not possibly achieve a nuanced understanding of the auto-focalized imagery unless we relate its implications to the broader meanings that are conveyed through the voice-over narration and, thus, viewing the shot of the ultrasound image in isolation would only convey abstract information that the spectator could not relate to the characters themselves nor the thematic content of the film. As will be demonstrated later on, the voice-over narrator's comments on fighting games and our inability to understand ourselves are quite applicable to the behaviour of many of the film's protagonists. I would argue that when this information is juxtaposed with the emphatic marker of the ultrasound image, which is internally focalized through the mother's eyes, and yet

transmits meanings by itself vis-à-vis auto-focalization, we, the viewers, are able to gain further insight on the consciousness of some of the film's characters, albeit in an extremely sublime and indirect way.

On a thematic level, since the shot functions as a hinge for maintaining continuity in the transition from scene to scene, it serves well to draw rather interesting parallels between the evolutionary processes that govern the development of life, technology and art. The statements of the voice-over narrator seem to suggest that computer games are indeed representative of the human condition and, in this way, technological artistry and innovation is viewed as an extension of us, our behaviour and our limitations. That said, while the inclusion of the voice-over dialogue is essential in relating these intriguing themes, the visual materiality of the ultrasound image, particularly its ambiguity in representing both life and technology at the same time, is successful in adding greater depth to the implications of the overall shot sequence. Thus, the emphasis that auto-focalization places on the iconic or material nature of the film text serves as a useful tool for the extrapolation of further meanings from this scene. At the same time, this entire sequence reveals that, more often than not, it would be problematic to analyse the surface image of a shot outside of the broader syntagmatic chain of signs that surrounds it, as previously argued, since, in this case, the establishing shot that features Xiao-Yan along with the opening shot of the business meeting are both effective and necessary in anchoring the intermediary presentation of the ultrasound image.

On a different note, the ambiguous focalization that is manifested in this sequence interferes with our ability to distinguish between its different sources of narration, assuming that there are indeed more than just one. In a visual sense, the cut to the ultrasound image implies that the shot is exclusively narrated (and focalized) by the joyful Xiao Yan, while, in an aural sense, the narration is strictly guided by the voice-over dialogue of Ota's translator combined with the rhythmic heartbeats and the murmur of white noise that surrounds them. Some might argue that both of these characters are performing two different narrative functions: on the one hand, Xiao Yan simply acts as a visual focalizer by looking at the ultrasound image that we see through her eyes in the intermediary shot of the ultrasound screen, while, on the other hand, the simultaneous speech acts of the translator serve strictly as a form of commentary. Unfortunately, such a conclusion would be inaccurate or even baseless, as by focusing strictly on the spoken

words of the translator, it would fail to take into account the visual elements that are inscribed onto the film text, which, at a broader level, would imply that the text as imagery, presented specifically through the eyes of a character, could not represent any kind of narrating function. Much of this is tied into a convention that has been well established within literary narratology for decades: that is, that narrating acts cannot occur within the story layer, since, traditionally speaking, narration can only be manifested through a form of verbal or written commentary that stems from a time and place that is posterior to that of the story world. If we view narration, in essence, as an act of mediation in which the story somehow becomes biased by an outside agent, effaced or otherwise, then it would be unfounded to identify Xiao Yan, the focalizer, as a narrator. In terms of Bal's model, processes of narration take place at the textual layer and, as such, we must look to the linguistic signs that are manifested at that portion of the narrative to determine whether or not the qualities of the text are, in fact, mediating our understanding of a film's characters and plot without the protagonists themselves being privy to such information. If the textual layer is capable of transmitting additional commentary that is outside of the characters' field of knowledge, then it would seem that Bal's distinction between story and text, at least, in terms of how she situates the roles of characters and narrators, would appear to be valid.

However, if we view the shot only according to the surface material that is depicted through the film text and accept that it is focalized in its entirety through Xiao Yan's eyes, then we would be unable to pinpoint other visual markers that would suggest that an external agent of narration is ultimately guiding its presentation. Based on this, it might be quite reasonable to assume that Xiao Yan is indeed a narrator, at least, for a limited period of time and, therefore, Bal's distinction could not apply to this portion of the shot sequence. Yet, we must also take into account the abrupt transition (which could also be regarded as a textual component) from the shot of her lying on the bed to the shot of the ultrasound image, an intervention of which is necessary in indicating to the audience that a shift in both focalization and narration has occurred. Ultimately, I would argue that this cut represents the transference of narrating functions from an effaced agent that is only identifiable in terms of the abrupt transition that it imposes onto the text to a familiar character who is clearly grounded within the temporal order of the story world. In the end, both of these figures might exist in a state of symbiosis whereby they

dependently feed off of one another in presenting and implying the broader meanings that are reflected in this overall shot sequence. Nevertheless, the implication that Xiao Yan can temporarily function as an exclusive narrator during the internally focalized shot of the ultrasound monitor seems to indicate that Bal's distinction between story and text does not always hold true.

That aside, it is fairly obvious that the content projected through the voice-over track well compliments the image that is internally focalized through Xiao Yan's eyesight and, therefore, the visual and aural fields appear to contribute to one another in producing the parallel meanings that relate to both scenes. However, once we cut to the business meeting, the translator no longer serves as a voice-over narrator, particularly because she is externally focalized, and, therefore, I would argue that she is no longer engaging in (or at least contributing to) a process of narration, but simply living and acting in the scene itself. Thus, this sequence seems to indicate that focalizers can both adopt and discard narrating functions quite fluidly, often so much so that it is difficult to determine where each process begins and ends.

3. The Use of Reflections in Ambiguous Focalization

In parallel to the reoccurring motif of using windows, doorways and other structures to create additional levels of framing and mediation in *A Confucian Confusion*, it should come as no surprise that one of the most pervasive, yet peculiar aspects of mise-en-scene in *Yi Yi* is the continuous presentation of surface reflections in many of the film's shots. This approach to mise-en-scene creates a rich tapestry of visual information whereby the characters become figuratively split into two beings, a process of which uncovers a myriad of profound clues in terms of the film's broader thematic and philosophical implications. Of course, numerous films have used mirror reflections to achieve an affect that is altogether objective, as, for example, a mirror could be placed in order to expand the film space by revealing off-screen actions and objects or it may allow us to view on-screen objects from different angles, but this is certainly not the case in *Yi Yi*.

In many movies, a character stares into a mirror as to indicate a higher degree of self-awareness and self-reflection to the audience, but what he or she becomes aware of

depends largely on the narrative circumstances. The character could be contemplating the enigma of self-identity; engaging in acts of vanity or narcissism; or achieving some form of personal revelation. In some cases, the mirror image is used to represent the character as divided between consciousness and unconsciousness, while, in other cases, reflections might permit one aspect or quality of a character to be isolated. For example, in a famous scene from Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) the high degree of rage and paranoia that is embodied in the character played by Robert DeNiro becomes clearly emphasized when he confronts his mirror image and repeats the same challenge to himself over and over again: "You talkin' to *me*?"¹⁷ In this way what is altogether private and subjective about the character becomes objectified and straight forward to the audience, at least to some degree.

However, the use of mirror images in *Yi Yi* does not represent a desire to achieve any of these conventional affects, as, in most cases, the film's characters do not appear to be aware of their extant reflections even when these are in such close proximity to them. Of course, one might wonder why the characters should be aware of their mirror images at all, given that we, in the real world, could usually care less about the variety of reflective surfaces that surround us on a daily basis, especially in the urban milieu. Nevertheless, this does not explain why the film makers would make a conscious decision to feature mirror images so prominently in the background of many scenes, nor does this account for why window reflections are frequently used to obstruct the space between the camera and characters throughout the duration of the film. While we were quick to dismiss Edward Branigan's model of focalization in the introduction of this paper, we could regard his notions of *character reflection* and *projection*, both of which pre-date his analysis of focalization, as quite useful for our discussion of the roles of both window reflections and film projections in *Yi Yi*. Furthermore, these concepts deserve our attention as they essentially refer to the two different aspects of auto-focalization, respectively, that Miguel and Mainar had established.

Branigan believes that, "In a reflective subjectivity that employs a mirror there is literally a frame within a frame which signals a new and distinct level of narration. The

¹⁷ See Branigan, *Point of View in the Cinema*, 127-128.

inner frame displays a series of spaces generated by, subordinate to, a character,”¹⁸ but, according to him, this only occurs when a character consciously gazes into a mirror and sees him/herself. He goes on to argue that, “It is not the reflection of a character which is subjective – for we may see reflections of which the character is unaware – but the *look* into the mirror which makes the mirror a (temporary) frame for narration.” Thus, the occurrence of character reflection is contingent on a character’s act of visual perception, which, in turn, inspires him/her to engage in a conscious process of mental self-reflection. This also applies to Branigan’s alternative notion of character projection, which occurs when a character’s heightened state of consciousness appears to be reflected by particular objects within mise-en-scene [similar to auto-focalization] since, after all, he does claim that it allows the character, “...to experience the operation of consciousness (heightened self-awareness) from an external, alienated position.”¹⁹ Here, I do not agree with Branigan’s claim that our increased access to subjectivity is only signalled by a character’s self-conscious act of seeing, nor do I share his belief that it must coincide with a character’s “heightened self-awareness.” In *Yi Yi*, various reflections and other symbolic objects that are not perceived by the characters themselves, at least within the present-time circumstances of such scenes, can be extremely complimentary in alluding to the quagmire of subjective uncertainty that often plagues their minds. At the very least, some window or mirror reflections reveal more information on the broader physical, commercial and social environment that arguably contributed to the formation of their existential crises, such as when we see the characters through a blur of urban imagery that scrolls over office windows or car windshields in so many different scenes. In this way, these symbols emphasize the backdrop of urban modernity that surrounds them, along with all of its potential trappings of hedonistic materialism and mass-consumption, problems of which surely fuelled the downfall of foolish characters such as A-Di.

Ultimately, I agree with the film critic John Anderson when he suggests that this recurring visual element expands the subjectivity that surrounds the characters by alluding to a profound sense of “moral uncertainty.”²⁰ Arguably, the immorality of the

¹⁸ Ibid., 129.

¹⁹ Ibid., 137.

²⁰ John Anderson, *Edward Yang* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 91.

characters ultimately stems from their propensity to identify themselves and others, often negatively, according to false assumptions, biases and/or egocentric delusions. Why do they frequently fall victim to these kinds of mistakes? This question can be answered if we consider the parallel implications of Yang-Yang's motives for taking up photography and approaching the art form in such an unusual way. Throughout the film, we can see the young child use the camera to capture objects that we could not easily see, such as a mosquito located on the far side of a wall. More importantly, Yang-Yang often takes pictures of characters from angles that they could not normally access themselves, most notably of the backsides of their heads or bodies. Why does he use the camera in such an unconventional way? What is the purpose of showing someone the back of his/her head? As he tells A-Di near the end of the film, "You can't see it yourself, so I can help you," which serves as a powerful analogy for his uncle's unwillingness to be honest with himself and his loved ones. Thus, it is only by viewing reality from different perspectives, that is by stepping outside of our own narrow mindedness, that we might come closer to achieving a better understanding of the various uncertainties that confront us in life, particularly in relating to one another. This theme, which is also an active part of Yang-Yang's psyche throughout the film, is clearly auto-focalized through the prop of the camera – this could not be highlighted through an application of external focalization given that such a mode of analysis would not emphasize the potential relationships that exist between the device and the child's consciousness, since it would focus our attention squarely on the perspective of the camera and how it views the characters and objects of the film's story world. At the same time, the auto-focalized shots of the camera could not be rendered as meaningful unless we relate them to the child's dialogue as well as the unusual pictures that are produced by his usage of the device and, hence, we can see, once again, how an interpretation of imagery should not rest upon an analysis of auto-focalized shots in pure isolation from other narrative elements.

That aside, in the vast majority of scenes, mirror images and other surface reflections are used to emphasize the extent to which the characters are constrained by their own narrow mindedness and self-absorption without them necessarily being aware of having such psychological shortcomings. A very telling example of this occurs when Min-Min breaks down into tears over her failure to say anything truly meaningful to her bed-ridden, comatose mother. At first, one might suspect that her frustration stems from

her inability to maintain dialogue in order to stimulate the weakened senses of her unconscious mother, a measure of which was strongly recommended by the family physician in a previous scene. However, once Min-Min exposes to her husband the true reasons for her state of histrionic depression, it becomes quite clear that she is far more concerned with her own affairs rather than her mother's condition. She declares, "I can't bear it. I have so little. How can it be so little? I live a blank! Everyday, I'm like a fool! What am I doing everyday? [long pause] If I ended up like her one day..." but then she fails to complete her final sentence as her increasing anxiety leaves her at a loss for words. Here, the emotive acting talents of Elaine Jin serve so well to convince us that Min-Min is indeed descending into a downward spiral of increasing anxiety, self-doubt and hopelessness, one that would soon lead her to abandon her family, even in this time of crisis, and stay at a Buddhist retreat for well over a week. The entire shot presents only her sitting on a stool in front of an armoire in her bedroom, while her husband is located nearby in an off-screen position. Throughout its duration, we can clearly see the streams of tears flowing down her cheeks, the contortions of her quivering lips, the sense of severe desperation in her sad eyes and the erratic shaking of her hunched figure, all of which become more and more exacerbated as the shot unfolds.

Aside from these visual signs, the auto-focalization of her existential crisis is also reflected in another element of *mise-en-scene* that lies within her immediate environment, namely the large mirror that is situated behind her. Throughout the entire shot, we are permitted to see a perspective that she cannot possibly see herself through the vehicle of the mirror, which displays a reflection of the back of her head. If we consider this image in relation to her son's philosophical interests, as previously described, then one could argue that the reflection represents Min-Min's inability to step outside of her self-centred state of mind and view reality in a more positive way. I fully agree with Anderson when he aptly describes the reasons for her emotional breakdown as follows: "It is clearly meant to be about her, not NJ or her kids or her mother or any spiritual void she imagines herself to be feeling."²¹ What kind of alternative viewpoint might allow Min-Min to resolve her crisis? Unfortunately, as we come to realize near the end of the film, she does not manage to learn anything from her stay at a spiritual retreat and, as a result, is left in

²¹ Ibid., 93.

largely the same state of existential uncertainty, albeit in a somewhat calmer frame of mind. Ultimately, she fails to understand that she has a truly wonderful life with a devoted husband and two honest children, all of whom, despite their own preoccupations, genuinely care about her happiness and welfare. Aside from this, she has certainly forged her own path in life as a successful career woman by working as an executive manager in a local company. As a double-income household, the Jian family is fairly well off by most contemporary standards and, therefore, they are able to maintain a very comfortable lifestyle. Thus, I cannot see how she can describe her life as a “blank” when she is actually surrounded by such positive circumstances, just as she cannot see the back of her head when she sits in front of the mirror.

However, in this particular scene it is difficult to determine whether the action is focalized through the external gaze of the camera or through the eyes of NJ, since the position that is occupied by the shot of Min-Min is in close proximity to NJ’s location. Thus, we can be assured that NJ is able to see the mirror image, which could suggest, by extension, that he also recognizes the high degree of self-absorption and ungratefulness that is reflected by his wife’s behaviour. Even though he attempts to console and accommodate his wife in this scene, I would argue that his renewed interest in Sherry, which almost leads him to have an extra-marital affair, is indicative of the dissatisfaction that he feels over his marriage to a rather cold and detached woman. This condition is emphasized explicitly when he tells Sherry that she is the only woman that he has truly ever loved, which occurs near the end of their bitter-sweet trip to Japan. Thus, one could argue that NJ contributes to the narration of the shot that features Min-Min’s breakdown, not only in his capacity to focalize the entirety of the shot through his eyes, but through his perception of the mirror image and his awareness of its metaphoric implications – no, he may not be conscious of the symbolic meanings of the reflection in a direct sense, but, at the very least, he is all too familiar with his wife’s sense of narcissism.

Similarly, the narrow-mindedness of other characters is also implied in many shots of cars or buildings when the space between the camera and the actors is obstructed by windowpanes. As such, we are constantly confronted by glass reflections that the characters could not presumably see themselves since these are depicted on the outside of the windowpanes. In other scenes, we may be able to see the mirror images of a character reflected by glass surfaces that are located in the background of a shot, far beyond the

scope of his/her eyesight. In any case, these methods of mise-en-scene (and others) are quite useful in conveying information that is generally unavailable to the characters themselves, specifically the knowledge that the feelings of anxiety, confusion, depression or apathy that the characters usually experience are ultimately caused by their inability to view reality from fresh, unrealized perspectives. Strangely enough, this produces a rather contradictory form of character focalization whereby the audience is permitted not to discover more about what the characters are, but what they are not, which is achieved through the angle of the camera and its ability to capture the mirror images. While this form of character focalization could only be transmitted by a source of narration that exists outside of the immediate story world, I would, nonetheless, suggest that the level of awareness that is embodied by Yang-Yang and Ota, both of whom are remarkably interchangeable in many ways, blurs the lines that supposedly separate the extra-diegetic realm of the narrator and the intra-diegetic world of the character, respectively.

Bearing all of this in mind, we can now illustrate some of these points by way of an example. In one important scene, NJ, Da-Da and other corporate partners are discussing how to develop a new business strategy in order to rescue their computer company from recent slumps in sales and profits, while driving back to the office after a lunch break. Similar to the car scenes in *A Confucian Confusion*, the characters are filmed by a static camera frame that is positioned outside of the front or rear windshields of the vehicle, depending on the shot. In the first shot, we can primarily see NJ and his top partner Da-Da sitting in the front seats of the car, but the clarity of our visual field is obstructed somewhat by the soft reflections of the buildings, store fronts and traffic signs that line the streets of downtown Taipei. In turn, the superimposition of urban imagery that scrolls smoothly over the characters' faces, while they drive and chat, reminds us of two important points that revolve mostly around thematic issues: first, it is implied that the characters are intimately attached to, or even dependent upon, the urban milieu of the big city from where they had spent most of their lives; second, it represents how it is possible to view life from multiple perspectives, even if we are limited to viewing an image from only one static vantage point. As previously mentioned, we are constantly reminded, throughout the entire story, that the pervasive melancholy of the characters' emotional states is largely the product of their failure to understand their own limitations, to recognize their complicity in contributing to their own crises, to move beyond the

restrictions imposed by their own acts of self-denial, and, perhaps most importantly, to genuinely empathize with each other, largely because they are far too self-absorbed with their own personal affairs and interests. Now, if we are willing to accept this interpretation, then we could rightfully view it as an important element of auto-focalization in so far as the themes of narrow-mindedness and self-denial are symbolized by the scene's visual elements, namely the window reflections, that the characters themselves cannot possibly see – in parallel, some characters, such as A-Di are altogether unaware that their personalities exhibit these shortcomings, while other characters, such as NJ, are able to recognize these limitations within themselves and others. Thus, these auto-focalized reflections are able perform the twofold purpose of revealing information on both the themes and characters of the film.

Moreover, this overall perspective on the role of surface reflections is well complimented by the immediate context that surrounds the subject of the characters' dialogue, given that they are struggling to find a new angle on how to approach the development of their failing business. At this point, while they are well aware that the standard business strategy that they had used since the birth of their company is no longer suitable for the present marketplace, they are still unable to think of any suitable alternatives that might rescue them from their financial turmoil. Once again, the characters, themselves, cannot step outside of their own personal habits and experiences to view things from new, undiscovered perspectives. This kind of thematic consideration is not only auto-focalized, in the visual sense, through the extant reflections that sprawl over the car, but is also shown through the vantage point of the second shot of the sequence whereby we can see through the rear windshield and observe the backside of another partner's head. Thus, we are, once again, granted a privileged access to a perspective that could not possibly be realized by the characters themselves.

We can also see how this constraint is reflected in their heated debate over whether or not they should commission the work of the talented, but experimental Japanese game designer, Ota, rather than invest in someone who could offer the inexpensive, yet superficial software produced by local "copycat" designers who merely steal the ideas of others to produce their products. Not surprisingly, we come to learn, later on, that some of NJ's partners are interested in hiring a Taiwanese "copycat" artist, named Ato, who is famous for violating international patent laws through his piracy of

others' software models. It is certainly of no coincidence that the name Ato is simply a mirror image of Ota, as this inversion in the spelling of nomenclature clearly reflects how both of these figures are polar opposites in terms of personality, sentiment and intent. Much to NJ's dismay, most of his partners argue in favour of seeking the short-term "band-aid solution" that is embodied by the commercially minded Ato as opposed to recognizing the great potential that might lie in taking the bumpy, yet ultimately beneficial long road at which Ota stands.

4. The Use of Projections

Similar to the use of window reflections, the film makers also rely on film projections to flesh out the consciousness of a character as well as the atmosphere of a scene, which occurs, most notably, in one sequence that features Yang-Yang who unexpectedly walks into the presentation of a documentary on the creation of life in an all-girls class, while attempting to hide out from the school disciplinarian whom he had just accidentally bombed with a water balloon. Anderson describes this scene as the moment in which, "Yang-Yang has his inaugural moment of artistic lucidity,"²² - I am not so convinced that "artistic" would be the best way to describe the kind of "lucidity" that the young boy experiences here, but one can, nonetheless, be assured that he undergoes a state of heightened self-awareness that is aided, in large part, by the unusual visual elements that become auto-focalized in this scene. What is so captivating about it is reflected in its ability to emphasize the boys' precise frame of mind by blurring the lines between focalization and narration in such a way as to convey the impression that his stream of consciousness is pouring out into the physical environment that surrounds him. As Anderson observes, this scene is, "the type that completely transcends the action and certainly loosens any literary tethers that might attach his [Yang's] film to the ground, releasing it – no, propelling it – into a visual ether."²³

In the first shot of this scene, Yang-Yang enters a classroom and stands under the doorway in a state of bewilderment, while nervously peering around to see if anyone has

²² Ibid., 88.

²³ Ibid.

detected his arrival – this image is significant in and of itself, but we will return to its implications at the end of this section. Then, he abruptly finds a seat at the back of the classroom and looks on to watch how the violent forces of nature were so crucial to the early formations of life on Earth at which point there is a cut to the colourful wash of clouds projected on to the film screen. Throughout this, we can hear the powerful voice of a female narrator who describes how the chaotic clash of natural elements laid down the foundations for the birth of organisms at the dawn of time. Two shots later, we return to a close-up of Yang-Yang who looks on perhaps with a sense of enthusiasm, at least, until he is distracted by the Tall Girl who enters the classroom and discretely lifts up her skirt to reveal her underwear to the young boy, much to our astonishment. After the Tall Girl's teacher asks her to find a seat quickly, she walks past the puzzled child and the camera cuts to a shot of her standing directly in front of the projector screen presumably looking for a vacant seat. Given that we were just presented with a prior shot of Yang-Yang eyeing the girl as she walked past him, the subsequent shot of her shadowy figure in front of the projector screen could be considered as an eyeline match that is intended to render the focus of Yang-Yang's visual field (i.e. internal focalization).

Throughout this scene, the authoritative voice of the documentary's narrator alludes to the prepubescent tension that is implied through this sequence as she states, "The two opposing forces are attracted towards each other. It grows irresistible. In one flashing moment, the two violently reunite." Moreover, the awesome imagery of the violent lightening storms that are projected on to her body along with the voluminous thunder of the documentary's sound track, both serve as marked cues to heighten our awareness of the romantic undertones that characterize the relationship between this unlikely couple throughout most of the movie. In a previous scene, we can see how the girl likes to abuse her power as a student leader when she singles out Yang-Yang for punishment and humiliation upon discovering that some of his classmates had unjustifiably accused her of being the school disciplinarian's "concubine." Of course, most adults should be familiar with the stereotypical image of young boys and girls who antagonize and harass each other at school in order to disguise their true feelings of romantic curiosity towards one another. This popular conception is simply reinforced in that earlier scene when one of Yang-Yang's male classmates suggests that the Tall Girl probably has a crush on him. This earlier event serves as an important point of reference

once we view the scene that takes place during the documentary presentation in the classroom. At the same time, the use of the projected imagery is also significant, not only in auto-focalizing the sexual tension that underlies the relationship between these children, but in highlighting Yang-Yang's first voyage into romantic self-discovery as well, as naïve as this might be for a boy of his young age. This interpretation seems to accord with Anderson's general observation that, "...these semi-hallucinatory moments constituted the arrival of knowledge or beauty,"²⁴ for some characters in Yang's films. After all, the documentary's narrator does comment that, "That was the beginning of everything," an allusion of which not only refers to the origin of life itself, but that of Yang-Yang's first foray into an exploration of love and sexuality.

However, although the presence of the eyeline match should clearly indicate that this sequence should be regarded strictly as a form of internal focalization, one might wonder if the metaphoric and symbolic connections that become auto-focalized through the colourful imagery of this scene are also recognized, even in the slightest, within the thought process of Yang-Yang, himself. After all, according to Branigan the technique of character projection provides the character with greater freedom, "...to experience the operation of consciousness (heightened self-awareness)" from outside of his/her own perceptual and psychological constraints. If Yang-Yang is not aware of these implications, would this imply that there is a broader tract of narration that is not reflected within the information that we attribute to the psychological state of the young boy? Here, I would argue that the theory of auto-focalization comes to our aid in freeing us from the constraints that are imposed by Branigan's equation of subjective experience with the degree of self-awareness that is reflected by a character. I would contend that whether or not Yang-Yang is truly aware of what is taking place in this scene, this should not prevent us from associating its specific visual elements with a marked change in his consciousness and realm of subjective experience. Granted, he may be altogether confused by the full range of sexual implications that are set forth by the voice-over dialogue, the chaotic imagery, and the seductive actions of the girl, but all of these aspects of *mise-en-scene* are, nonetheless, crucial in revealing more than meets the eye about the experience of the young boy. One could not possibly construct a markedly

²⁴ Ibid., 75.

different interpretation of the overall sequence, without fallaciously regarding its crucial qualities of *mise-en-scene* as either arbitrary or negligible, a mistake of which would be produced, by default, through an application of external focalization.

Moreover, while Yang-Yang may not truly understand what takes place in this scene, arguably due to his young age, imagine if he were to reflect on this event through the power of memory at a later point in his life. Would he not be able to comprehend more about the deeper implications of this chance encounter with the Tall Girl, especially with the gift of hindsight and greater life experience? Ultimately, I would contend on the basis of reasoned intuition that, during the eyeline match sequence, Yang-Yang is vaguely aware of the heightened sense of tension that is emphasized through the combination of visual and aural symbols or, at the very least, all of these serve to subliminally guide him further towards his discovery of romantic love. This image is reinforced later on in the film when we discover that Yang-Yang attempts to improve his swimming skills in order to impress the Tall Girl who, as we soon discover, exercises regularly at a local swimming pool.

On a different note, the beginning of this sequence reveals how architectural elements of *mise-en-scene* can also contribute to the auto-focalization of a character's subjective field, aside from other objects and images in this film. In many scenes, structures such as doorways, archways, overpasses and cross-walks can take on symbolic implications that are quite relevant to enhancing our knowledge of the characters' experiences. When a character passes through these or similar structures, this event often represents that he/she is situated at, "...a point of return before the step into some new phase, some new dilemma,"²⁵ and, as such, these locations serve to auto-focalize a transitional moment of indecision, ambivalence or limbo on his/her behalf. Thus, in this scene, when Yang-Yang enters the classroom and stands at the doorway in a state of bewilderment, this represents that he is about to embark on a new voyage in his life, one that will inevitably result in an uneasy mixture of excitement and confusion for the boy. Similarly, in an earlier scene, when he stands under a door frame before taking a snapshot for the first time in his life, the structure symbolizes a rite of passage whereby the young boy begins his entry into a life of artistic exploration.

²⁵ Ibid., 91.

This recurring motif also applies to other characters of the film. For example, when Ting-Ting stands at a cross-walk and holds hands with her close friend's ex-lover, Fatty, this moment represents that she is caught up in a moral dilemma that centres on a conflict between loyalty and sexual curiosity. This sense of moral confusion becomes emphasized even more so in a subsequent scene when she paces slowly underneath a rail road trestle after sharing a very awkward moment of (unfulfilled) sexual tension with Fatty in a hotel room. Of course, the same could also be said for NJ when he and Sherry reignite their long lost passions while standing hand in hand at a cross walk in Japan.

5. Problematic Eyeline Matches: Blurring the Lines Between Levels of Focalization and Narration

Unlike in *A Confucian Confusion*, there are numerous scenes in *Yi Yi* that present fairly straight forward manifestations of character based perspective through the convention of the eyeline match. At the same time, there are, however, several instances in which the eyeline match is applied or implied in such a peculiar way that it is quite difficult to determine exactly where we should place this technique within the external-internal categories of focalization, as noted previously in the scene that featured Min-Min, NJ and the mirror reflection. The most striking example of this ambiguity is perhaps reflected when the Jian family members take turns talking to the comatose grandmother, as per their physician's request. Most of these scenes contain shots displaying the characters according to the vantage point that is occupied by the grandmother, which is located at the rear of the bed where her head lies. However, could we regard these times as manifestations of internal focalization, according to Deleyto's definition, given that the grandmother is immersed in a deep state of unconsciousness? On this issue, I would argue that whether or not we label this as a form of internal focalization or choose to apply a different term, for that matter, we can nevertheless regard this as a virtual approximation of the grandmother's optical point of view even if her eyes are continuously closed. In turn, this impossible rendering of visual perspective could, by way of inference, reflect that the grandmother is somehow aware of what is going on around her, in spite of her grave physical condition. Conversely, it may also reflect the irrational hope of her worrisome relatives that she may somehow be able to hear what

they say and, therefore, justify their seemingly fruitless attempts to stimulate her senses through intimate forms of conversation. In other words, the illusion that we are able to see things through her eyes may, in fact, represent the projection of her relatives' desire for her recovery as well as their guilt over being so self-absorbed, in respectively different ways, throughout the entire time period of her vegetative state. If this is true, then these references to the grandmother's proximate vantage point are more relevant to the internal focalization of the specific attitudes and preoccupations that are held by her relatives, rather than the visual perspective that might (impossibly) originate from her.

The presentation of the grandmother's vantage point complicates our understanding of the kinds of narrating agents whose perspectives become focalized in films. Perhaps the term focalization, in and of itself, would be insufficient according to its connotations in meaning to account for the presentation of a viewpoint that does not belong to a conscious entity. Granted, one could, quite understandably, argue that these supposed presentations of the grandmother's visual perspective must be forms of external focalization since it would be entirely illogical to assume that an unconscious entity is capable of seeing anything at all. However, if this is true, then why would the film makers choose to place the camera in a location that is remarkably similar to that which is occupied by the grandmother's eyes? It would be unreasonable to assume that the position of the frame is altogether arbitrary or coincidental, since experienced film makers are usually quite methodical about how they construct a given shot or scene through camera placement. Thus, while we might be quite reluctant to regard these shots as reflections of internal focalization, alternatively, it would be just as problematic to view these strictly as forms of external focalization.

Once again, auto-focalization allows us to clarify the mire of confusion that is produced by an application of Deleuze's model to another portion of this film. While we are unable to pinpoint any specific manipulations of *mise-en-scène* that might reveal more about the characters mental states, during these shots, we can, nevertheless, look to the surface imagery that is conveyed through their body language and facial expressions and then evaluate these qualities in relation to the particular location that is occupied by the camera. For example, when we see the sense of self-doubt that is implied through the melancholy eyes and quivering lips of A-Di, as he tells one lie after another to his comatose grandmother, we become well aware of his psychological turmoil and,

therefore, learn more about his personal realm of subjective experience. The sadness of his facial features serves well to counterpoint the bogus sense of confidence and joy that is reflected by the positive content of his falsehoods. However, we could not possibly arrive at this understanding unless we relate the surface appearance of A-Di to the information that is disclosed through dialogue both during and prior to this scene. He tells his mother that he is richer than ever due to his ever expanding list of business contacts and, therefore, she does not need to worry about his financial affairs. In fact, he claims that he is so well off that people often come to him for loans, which is clearly a lie since he has yet to pay-off his debt to NJ as revealed in a previous scene.

Of course, previous segments of the film show that A-Di had borrowed \$9 million NT from his mistress, Yun-Yun, but, in actuality, he had foolishly squandered away this weighty sum on a fraudulent “get-rich-quick” scheme. The fact that he maintains a dubious relationship with his old flame even after he marries Xiao Yan only undermines our ability to attribute any shred of credibility to his personality. Thus, near the end of his monologue, when we see his face twitching nervously as he struggles to find something else, perhaps something genuine, to say to his mother, his underlying sense of hopelessness and humiliation becomes all the more obvious to us. As we shall see in the following section, a similar form of auto-focalization also occurs when Ting-Ting confronts her unconscious grandmother in a later scene, and desperately pleads for forgiveness since she suspects that she might have been responsible for her grandmother’s stroke.

6. The Internal Focalization of Imagined Experience - Dream Sequence or Reality?

By far, the most puzzling scene takes place at the end of the film when Ting-Ting returns home from the police station and discovers that her grandmother has suddenly recovered from her coma. At this point, Ting-Ting appears to be extremely disoriented and exhausted, which is not surprising given that the police had just questioned her about the complicity of her former first love in the brutal slaying of Mrs. Jiang’s lover, a high school English teacher. Furthermore, Ting-Ting’s sudden revelation that her ex-boyfriend had, in fact, been sleeping with her next door neighbour surely just added on to the immense pressure that had already caused her to have so many sleepless nights. At the

beginning of the scene, she sits quietly in her room and stares at the house plant that she had been trying to nurture, rather unsuccessfully, for a school project. The pronounced stillness of her eyes seems to indicate that she is immersed in a deep state of self-reflection probably in an attempt to make sense out of the disturbing events that had just unfolded in her life. Throughout this long take, the static camera frame serves well to compliment the auto-focalization of the profound sense of tiredness, bemusement and disillusionment that is projected subtly through the unmoving gaze of Ting-Ting's eyes, as she sits remarkably still by her bedroom desk and window. Yet, as contradictory as it may seem, the stillness of her posture also suggests that she might be feeling somewhat relieved that the dubious circumstances surrounding her involvement in the sordid love triangle had finally reached a state of closure, albeit one that was altogether tragic and undesirable. Near the end of this shot, we can begin to hear the faint melodies of a female voice humming from somewhere else inside the Jian family homestead, at which point Ting-Ting slowly rises from her chair and walks nonchalantly out of her bedroom.

In the following shot, the vantage point of the camera frame, placed roughly at eye level, implies that the imagery is now being internally focalized through her eyes. Much to our surprise, Ting-Ting sees her grandmother sitting upright in a chair, folding pieces of paper, as she quietly hums the soft tunes. Somehow, she has miraculously awakened from her comatose state, and yet when the camera cuts to a reverse shot that is presumably focalized through the grandmother, Ting-Ting does not appear to be moved by such a joyfully unexpected development, almost as if the tragic stroke had never really occurred in the first place. Even though the chances for her grandmother's recovery were extremely low, as predicted by the family doctor, the only things that Ting-Ting can say are, at first, extremely trivial and inappropriate: "I thought it was the nurse. It's 2:30. She's still not here." Meanwhile, the grandmother also seems to be altogether unaware that she had recently fallen victim to a crippling stroke. Through Ting-Ting's eyes, the following eyeline match offers a closer view of the contented grandmother who seems to be quietly amused by her construction of various origami figures – here, one might wonder how the victim of a very recent stroke, especially one of such an old age, could possibly be dexterous enough to create such delicate paper statues. As a side note, I would argue that the origami figures become auto-focalized in this scene by representing the Grandma's serene state of mind as well as the beauty that she seems to implicitly

attribute to the world through her calm demeanour, beaming smiles and gentle humming. Regardless, when the grandmother looks up at Ting-Ting and beams a warm smile, we can be assured that she is indeed cognizant and aware of her granddaughter's presence.

Up to this point, the portion presented in the grandmother's bedroom had consistently followed a pattern of shot/reverse shot whereby the camera frame alternated back and forth between displaying the different vantage points occupied by Ting-Ting and her grandmother, respectively. Shortly after this, the sequence of shot/reverse shots comes to an end and we can see Ting-Ting kneeling on the floor, while closely inspecting the fine craftsmanship of one of the origami sculptures. Then, she slowly rests her head on her grandmother's lap and launches into a stirring monologue that is remarkably similar to what one might say during a time of intense prayer. In sum, she describes that she has not been able to sleep since her grandmother's demise, mostly because she thinks that she is indirectly responsible for the tragedy. Recall that the grandmother had suffered her stroke in a nearby alleyway and that she had ventured to such an unsafe place, for a person of her age and senility, only because Ting-Ting had neglected to take out just one bag of trash on that same day. Thus, it is not so surprising that the young woman would blame herself for the culmination of her grandmother's demise, as irrational as such a determination might be to most outside observers.

Furthermore, Ting-Ting's grand confession is also motivated by her involvement in the previously mentioned love triangle that had not only resulted in murder, but had also destroyed the strong bond of friendship that she had once shared with her next door neighbour, Lily. At the end of this powerful monologue, Ting-Ting expresses a feeling of redemption when she states to her grandmother, "Now you've forgiven me. I can sleep." Following this, while slowly drifting off to sleep, Ting-Ting voices a series of profound questions and statements that indicate that she might be wise beyond her years: "Grandma, why is the world so different from what we thought it was? Now that you're awake and see it again, has it changed at all? Now I close my eyes. The world I see is so beautiful." Following this there is a cut to a brief shot of the flower that Ting-Ting had been trying so hard to nurture, only this time we can see that its buds have finally blossomed, which presumably serves as a marker for the auto-focalization of a change in her state of mind – I believe that it mostly symbolizes that her child-like innocence has finally come to an end as she passes into adulthood with a greater sense of wisdom,

insight and self-reflexivity.

The events that had just transpired seem all the more unbelievable and unlikely, if we consider what takes place in the following scene. Ting-Ting awakens in her bed and overhears A-Di in another room, while he attempts to calm down the family nurse, Migo, who is weeping hysterically. When Ting-Ting walks into the living room and sees several health care workers standing around with glum looks on their faces, we suddenly realize that the grandmother has, in actuality, passed away, a fact of which is confirmed by the remainder of the film's story line. In light of this, what are we to make of the previous scene in which Ting-Ting had apparently seen, touched and spoken to her conscious grandmother? Did any of these events actually take place or were these merely the product of Ting-Ting's imagination or dream world? In all likelihood, the entire scene simply represented a dream that took place while Ting-Ting was sleeping, but we cannot be altogether certain of this given that very few textual markers were included that might indicate a direct transition to a dream sequence. As various film theorists have pointed out, film makers usually deploy conventional camera tricks and/or special effects to prompt the internal focalization of a character's dream, but these kinds of overt cues are altogether absent from the scene. Aside from realizing that the grandmother had indeed passed away, the only reference point that might imply our temporary access to Ting-Ting's dream is the shot of her waking up in the following scene. However, would this also imply that the shots of Ting-Ting sitting quietly in her room, just prior to seeing her awakened grandmother, were also a part of that dream sequence? Once again, we cannot be altogether sure due to a lack of clear-cut textual evidence, but since there are definite temporal, spatial and aural continuities that bind together all of the shots contained in the sequence, it seems possible that the entire scene is a figment of the young woman's imagination.

Regardless, given the extreme unlikelihood of the bizarre one-sided exchange that took place between Ting-Ting and her grandmother, it seems both intuitively sound and reasonable to conclude that such an interaction had never really occurred. More importantly for the purposes of this paper, what does this dream sequence tell us about processes of focalization? Of course, because the scene is a product of Ting-Ting's act of subconscious visualization, we can regard much or all of it as being focalized internally by her. However, it must be emphasized that it is difficult to pinpoint exactly where this

process begins since the opening of the scene, in which she returns home to reflect quietly in the solitude of her room, appears to be realistic to such an extent that it could not possibly be regarded as a non-event within the reality of the story world. Arguably, if we are unable to determine exactly when or where a process of focalization begins, then we are calling into question the applicability of the theory's overall external-internal sub-distinctions, at least in relation to these types of obscure scenes.

Moreover, the complex web of embedded levels of both external and internal focalization that are reflected principally in the latter half of this dream sequence, also raises several other problematic questions. For example, the final shot, on its own, could be regarded as a manifestation of external focalization, given that we can objectively see Ting-Ting kneeling next to her grandmother. This would imply that within the internal focalization of her own dream, she is externally focalizing herself as if she was having some form of an "out-of-body" experience. While some might regard this as being quite strange, it is not uncommon for films to resort to externally focalized shots in dream sequences in order to provide a broader, more objective view of a character's dream world for the benefit of the audience's knowledge. However, what are we to make of the intermittent series of reverse shots that are intended to present the visual perspective of her grandmother? Would these suggest that Ting-Ting was somehow able to see herself through her grandmother's eyes within her dream world? While the surrealism of many dreams might suggest that we have unlimited mobility in moving around our dream worlds, such a leap in point of view seems quite improbable.

All of these conflicts seem to reflect a considerable overlap between the functions of character-focalizers and narrators, so much so that it might be impossible to make firm distinctions between the two. While we might consider Ting-Ting as a focalizer-narrator in that the content of the dream sequence represents a subjective experience that can only belong to her, we might also view the ordering of the text, specifically the sequencing of shots along with their different vantage points, as an intervention undertaken by an external, effaced agent of narration. The fact that it is extremely difficult to determine exactly when the dream begins, only accentuates our inability to make firm distinctions. However, the dream does become anchored by the subsequent cut to Ting-Ting waking up in bed, which indicates that a marked form of closure is achieved, but only in relation to the end of the overall sequence – or does it? Thus far, we have not discussed the event

of Ting-Ting drifting off to sleep at the close of the supposed dream sequence. Would this imply that she was actually awake and cognizant up to that point? If so, we might have to accept that the grandmother had miraculously recovered and that their interaction had really taken place. Moreover, we would also have to assume that either Ting-Ting had gone to her bedroom to take a nap under her own accord or her grandmother had somehow carried her there, but both of these accounts are also problematic for different reasons. On the one hand, the image of Ting-Ting's closed eyes and the calm stillness of her body would suggest that she had fallen asleep, once and for all, in the grandmother's room, while, on the other hand, it would be hard to believe that an elderly woman who had just fallen victim to a stroke could possibly carry or move the young woman to another room. Perhaps the end of the scene simply indicates that she had fallen asleep within her dream, but, once again, due to the absence of overt textual cues, we cannot be sure of this either. All of this is complicated further by the inclusion of another shot in which Ting-Ting is holding one of the origami models in her hand shortly after she had woken up in the "real" story world, which would obviously suggest that the dream-like events had really occurred.

Ultimately, I believe that the temporal and spatial continuities that tie all of these scenes together so seamlessly, make it impossible for us to distinguish clearly between sources of narration and focalization throughout the so-called dream sequence and it is within these ambiguities that the overall success of the sequence lies, especially in terms of its potential to have a strong emotional and intellectual impact on the audience. Indeed, Anderson's brief summation of this sequence as just a "reunion...in a dream"²⁶ is highly reductive, simplistic and misleading, as it glosses over a series of glaring ambiguities that should not be overlooked. While I agree that the overall plot structure of the film along with our faculty of common sense would encourage us to view this portion of the film as a dream sequence, an in depth analysis of its shot ordering and elements of mise-en-scene suggests otherwise or, at the very least, constrains our ability to make firm conclusions beyond a reasonable doubt.

By blurring the lines between fantasy and reality, the film maker is ultimately providing a contrast to a story world that appears to be quite ordinary and realistic in

²⁶ Ibid., 90.

nearly all other scenes, which forces the audience to question their ongoing reconstruction of the narrative more so than ever before. In doing so, the subjective experience of Ting-Ting becomes emphatically marked more so, I would argue, than at any other time in the film. Yet, because the transition between scenes is so sublime and seamless, the shot sequence problematizes issues of narrative structure, narration and focalization without being pretentious or obtrusive and, therefore, many audience members might not even notice the logical contradictions that are implied by this ambiguous breach between fantasy and reality until much later, perhaps during a subsequent viewing. Moreover, all of these ambiguities seem to reinforce Deleyto's assertion that it is not always possible to differentiate between the functions of narrators and focalizers. In some respects, this sequence is remarkably similar to what we witness when Yang-Yang's awareness becomes heightened during the classroom scene that features the Tall Girl and the documentary film, as previously discussed. In either case, the ordering of shots, the shifts in the perspective of the camera and many key elements of mise-en-scene are manipulated in such a way as to indicate that the psychological experiences of the characters have become intensified.

As a side note of some relevance, I would like to mention that the film theorist, Bruce Kavin, had established four supposedly distinctive categories in *Mindscreen* (1979) to account for the different renderings of subjective experience in cinema, prior to the efforts of Deleyto, Miguel, Mainar and Branigan. On an intuitive level, his taxonomies of *self-consciousness* and *mindscreen* could be viewed as highly appropriate markers to describe, in general, how Ting-Ting's reflective state of mind is brought to bear in this scene. The former term refers to those times when the audience feels as if they are sharing, partly through visual cues, the reflexive perspective of a character within the temporal and spatial reality of the story world, while the latter term refers to moments when we are able to access the mind's eye of a character through images that are related to dreams, fantasies and memories.²⁷ What I like about both of these terms lies within the capacity of their definitional or semantic implications to account for the experiences of characters in ways that are far more specific and connotative than labels

²⁷ For a concise summation of these typologies see Bruce Kavin, *Mindscreen* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 190.

such as external/internal focalization or auto-focalization. Throughout this sequence we are truly made to feel that we are granted access to the self-consciousness of Ting-Ting, especially in comparison to most, if not all, other scenes in the film. By feeling closer than ever to her heart and mind, we are able to best objectify the mire of subjectivity that surrounds her state of consciousness. At the same time, because this seems to be a dream sequence, Kawin's notion of mindscreen also appears to be quite suitable, since we really feel as if Ting-Ting's imaginary vision has been projected on to the entirety of the screen.

However, if it is possible to use both of these labels to account for the peculiar nature of her experiences in this scene, then, clearly, their implications might denote as much ambiguity as is evidenced by the scene itself, let alone the application of focalization to film studies in general. This would also apply to the notions of *the mental image*, *the imaginary*, and *the memory image* that were endorsed and expanded upon by Christian Metz in his analysis of the classifications that were established in Jean Mitry's *Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma*, Vol. II (1965).²⁸ Thus, while I do appreciate the ability of these kinds of labels to carry connotations that are far more specific than those of focalization theories, I must admit that they also fall victim to a form of metaphorical looseness whereby one category can be easily subsumed to the other and vice-versa, thereby resulting in a marked sense of uncertainty and inconclusiveness. In part, I am simply mentioning this to indicate that, although some of the implications and terms of focalization theory were fresh and innovative, the need to address issues of character based subjectivity in film had been pressing long before the practitioners of focalization had arrived on the academic scene. Nonetheless, the ambiguities that came to be attributed to the theories of Kawin, Metz and Mitry became far too glaring to allow theorists to continue using their terms with sufficient confidence and, therefore, some of them had situated the models of focalization that were advanced in literary studies as a viable point of departure for the development of a new perspective on subject-object relations in film.²⁹

²⁸ See Christian Metz, "Current Problems in Film Theory," in *Screen 14*, no. 1 (Spring-Summer, 1973) 40-87.

²⁹ For Deleyto's critique of Mitry and Kawin, see Deleyto, 166-167. For a general critique of Metz, see Bordwell, 22-23.

7. Focalization, Effaced Interventions and Meta-Narration in *Yi Yi*

While *A Confucian Confusion* often relied on inter-titles to advance a variety of broad thematic considerations, *Yi Yi* uses more unusual devices, particularly computerized imagery, to achieve such ends. As previously discussed, the image of the ultrasound monitor served as an interesting segue between scenes, particularly in its ability to draw parallels between the development of life, art and technology. However, there is yet another scene that highlights thematic elements and challenges the traditional distinctions between characters and narrators through an unusual display of digitized sights and sounds. Near the end of the film, Ting-Ting is being questioned by two police officers about a criminal investigation at a police precinct, but, up to this point, we are not aware of the specific crime that had transpired, let alone her connection to such circumstances. We can only infer that the crime had taken place somewhere in her apartment building given that a previous scene had shown several police cruisers and ambulances arriving there during the early hours of the morning on that same day. However, a more detailed explanation is offered in the following shot where Ting-Ting is sitting in the waiting room of the police station, while watching a TV news program that features an anchorwoman reporting on the events of a murder that had, not coincidentally, taken place near the Jian residence. Following this, the camera cuts to a shot of the TV news report, and we can hear a male journalist reporting on the specific circumstances that surrounded the killing. Given that Ting-Ting had looked up at the TV at the end of the previous shot, it would be reasonable to assume that the transition to the next shot implies a form of internal focalization through the vehicle of an eyeline match sequence.

In any case, the journalist informs us that the suspect of the investigation happens to be Fatty, the teenager with whom Ting-Ting shared a brief romantic interlude that had abruptly ended in heartbreak. Much to our dismay, we suddenly realize that Fatty had been involved in a series of rather sordid love affairs that had not only involved both Ting-Ting and her close friend, Lily, but Lily's mother as well. We soon discover that the victim of Fatty's crime of passion was an older English teacher who Lily's mother, Mrs. Jiang, had been seeing romantically for a short time, aside from several other lovers. Then, the most peculiar aspect of this scene occurs, as while the reporter continues to inform us of the details of the crime, there is an unexpected cut to a shot of a computer

game that features a tall young figure kicking and stabbing a man to death. What is so troubling about the inclusion of the image is that it appears to have no spatial or temporal connection to any of the characters, including the reporters, presented in this scene. It would be unreasonable, if not ridiculous, to assume that the fighting game is a part of the news program and, as such, the final shot seems to be completely out of place, almost suggesting that some agent who is completely external to the story world had suddenly decided to make an intervention into the film text. Even after the shot fades to black and we are left with the reporter's final comments, "It was reportedly a grisly scene," we can still hear the game's digitized sounds of grunting and kicking exclusively featured on the sound track for several seconds.

What is the purpose of this shot and how does it impact our understanding of the overall narrative? Above all, the shot must have been included in order to draw certain parallels between various themes of the movie. Recall the scene in which Ota's translator tells NJ and his business partners about her employer's grand vision of designing a game that transcends the norm of violence that is reflected in most of the software that is produced in the computer gaming industry: "We haven't yet surpassed fighting and killing games, not because we haven't fully understood computers, but because we haven't fully understood ourselves [as] human beings." This simple line serves well to sum up one of the broader themes of the entire film and if we consider its meaning in relation to the juxtaposition of the news report and the fighting game shots, the latter should not appear to be so unusual or out of place. The inclusion of the fighting game shot indirectly implies that Fatty, had not yet understood himself or others as human beings and, therefore, he resorted to an act of violence in order to satisfy the irrational feelings of jealousy and rage that had suddenly consumed him upon discovering that he was not the only lover in Mrs. Jiang's life.

In terms of both focalization and narration, there are several problematic implications that are produced by this shot. First, if the news report was indeed internally focalized by Ting-Ting, would this suggest that the following shot of digital violence was merely a continuation of that process and, therefore, simply another object of her vision or, for that matter, imagination? Alternatively, was the shot manifested by a source of narration that was exclusively interested in communicating thematic elements to the audience? Resolving these questions largely depends on determining whether or not

Ting-Ting is aware of the thematic implications that are suggested by the video game shot. While there is no evidence that suggests that she would specifically realize the metaphorical connections among video games, violence and the limitations of human behaviour, one could argue that she comes to understand that amelioration can only be achieved by expanding one's world view through the discovery of alternative viewpoints. I would argue that this is reflected through the previously described dream sequence (which occurs immediately after the scene at the police station) once she realizes that her problems are insignificant in comparison to all of the things that should be valued in her life, an attitude of which is manifested through the wisdom and contentment of her grandmother who is able to appreciate the simple beauty of the world, as auto-focalized through the origami figures, despite the scores of troubles and worries that surround her family members. It is only through this revelation that Ting-Ting is able to forgive herself and finally fall asleep at the end of that sequence.

Thus, I believe the image of the fighting game is included to fulfil two purposes. On the one hand, it represents an intervention on behalf of an external source of narration, since it serves as an emphatic marker to auto-focalize the broader thematic considerations of the film, some of which are indeed a part of Ting-Ting's (and other characters') consciousness, while its unusual visual qualities are so out of place within the overall sequence of shots that regarding it as a product of Ting-Ting's eyesight or imagination would be highly problematic. On the other hand, if we consider this scene in relation to the subsequent dream sequence, it could represent a significant turning point for Ting-Ting, one in which she gradually comes to realize that the senses of guilt and isolation that she had been imposing on herself had merely resulted from her inability to step outside of her own narrow-mindedness and appreciate the positive aspects of her life, unlike Fatty who fell victim to his inability to look beyond his narcissistic jealousy and rage. From this point of view, it is extremely difficult to distinguish between elements of narration and character consciousness, since the two appear to overlap and blend together so seamlessly in terms of their implications.

That aside, if we were to look at the broad narrative context of the film from its beginning to end we could detect another element of characterization that is not directly reflected through processes of focalization, but is tied into another implication of Kawin's self-consciousness that we did not discuss in the previous section. Self-

consciousness does not simply represent the figurative outpouring of a character's state of mind into the *mise-en-scene*; it is also a reflection of how the attitude of a character might coincide with that of the narrator, implied author or perhaps even real-life director, depending on which term one might prefer to use.³⁰ Kawin himself is perfectly willing to go beyond the structural confines of the film text and look to the biographical circumstances of a film director to assess the extent to which a movie is or is not self-conscious. Although I do not fully disagree with this kind of methodology, I would prefer to think of the manifestation of the self-conscious as taking place whenever the world view and persona of a character happens to reflect the ethical or philosophical ideals that are implied through the thematic content that is transmitted through the meta-narration of a film. This allows us to view self-consciousness according to the implications of the text itself as opposed to our understanding of the viewpoints that are supposedly held by a real-life film maker.

Anderson points out that, in *Yi Yi*, the characters of Yang-Yang and Ota are quite representative of the thematic ideals that are expressed throughout the film, albeit in different ways. We have already discussed in detail how Yang-Yang's creative approach to photography reflects a clear parallel to the film's thematic treatment of issues of narrow mindedness, narcissism and limited perspective. Furthermore, during our analysis of the business presentation at NJ's company, we could see how Ota's views on video games and violence also complimented these recurring themes. However, there is still one more scene that deserves our attention, particularly in relation to these issues of self-consciousness, characterization and thematization. During their final dinner meeting in Japan, Ota decides to show NJ a card trick not simply as a form of casual entertainment, but as a symbolic marker for his philosophical outlook on life. Somehow, Ota is able to know where each card is in the deck without having to look at them at all. NJ becomes more and more amazed, as his associate correctly guesses the numbers and suits of each card, while flipping through the deck. Not surprisingly, NJ asks with a look of child-like curiosity, "How do you do that?" and seems to wonder if Ota had been using some kind of "slight-of-hand" magic or card counting method to accomplish such a degree of

³⁰ See Kawin's discussion of self-consciousness in relation to the films of Ingmar Bergman and Jean-Luc Godard in Kawin, 91-184.

omniscience. However, Ota replies that it is certainly not a trick and explains that, “I trained myself to know where each one is.” Here, Ota is referring to what is perhaps the broadest form of philosophical idealization that is implied through the thematic content of the film – that is, that we can only transcend the constraints of our narrow mindedness by allowing ourselves to view things through the fresh perspectives of others. In this scene, each and every card serves well to auto-focalize this thematic ideal, as well as the moral character and wisdom of Ota himself, qualities of which remain blatant and consistent throughout the film.

However, the cards would not be able to reflect any substantial form of auto-focalization unless we considered their symbolic implications in relation to Ota’s dialogue as well as the broad narrative context of the overall film. One might argue that Ota’s poetic waxing is also indicative of a parallel theme that could be related to the film’s implications on the role of art and film in the human experience. Not only are these revealed through Ota’s card trick, but through the uncanny sense of sublime omniscience that is often reflected by his dialogue in other scenes, almost as if he had somehow seen the entire film story before it had actually taken place. For example, when he greets NJ and Sherry in the lobby of a hotel when they first arrive at Tokyo, he tells the two ex-lovers, “You are young people,” which might strike many people as being odd given that all three of them are middle-aged, perhaps even well into their 50s. However, this unusual statement can appear to be much more sensible if we understand that NJ and Sherry are in the act of reliving their youth, which becomes all the more apparent once we see the couple walking hand in hand and reminiscing about old times in a subsequent scene. Thus, all of Ota’s remarkable insights, as subtle as they may appear to be, highlight an element of character based perspective that cannot be detected easily through an application of focalization theories, including auto-focalization itself. Regardless of whether we choose to call this self-consciousness, in Kavin’s terms, or something else, we can be certain that contemporary models of focalization are not adequate enough, by themselves, to account for these unusual forms of characterization and thematization.

Chapter III: Conclusions and Afterthoughts

Overall, the preceding case studies should illustrate and expand on the major points that were advanced in Chapter I concerning the extent to which focalization theories might or might not serve as useful tools in the analysis of character based subjectivity and narration in film studies. On the whole, the ambiguity that is generated intrinsically by the external and internal subcategories of Deleyto's model is strongly reflected in various ways by nearly all of the scenes that we have analysed from these films. In regards to *A Confucian Confusion*, our discussion of the roles of camera movement and character placement in reflecting figurative increases in internal focalization is particularly useful in demonstrating that the supposedly neutral perspective that is afforded by the camera frame, that is the external focalizer, indeed has the capacity to reveal a great deal of significant information on the perceptual and psychological experiences of characters in films. Furthermore, both of these techniques can be manipulated in such a way as to produce two different forms of ambiguous focalization.

First, the ability of the external perspective of the camera to grant us a higher degree of access to the subjective realms of characters, by default, undermines our capacity to distinguish between the sub-typologies of focalization exclusively according to the spatial criteria that is outlined by Deleyto, Bal, Branigan and other thinkers. Not only does this challenge the traditional notion that the camera permits us to realize greater neutrality and objectivity in film, but it indicates that it would be unsound to consider the spatial position of the camera without accounting for all of the elements of mise-en-scene that are contained within the frame when we attempt to evaluate processes of focalization and narration. While I admit that the external perspective of the camera provides us with a higher degree of omniscience by allowing us, in many cases, to see a greater amount of space from angles that are not available to the characters themselves, I would, nonetheless, contend that such an opportunity does not necessarily increase the extent to which we can objectify any evidence, relevant to characterization, that is presented within the composition of the frame. As an audience, we are often forced to objectify the subjective on the basis of very limited or tenuous information, but this process does not

simply hinge upon what is implied by the spatial position of the camera, given that our attention should rest principally upon the action and characters of the story world, all of which can only occupy the internal layer of *mise-en-scene*. In the end, I believe that much of the confusion that surrounds these troublesome issues centres on the misconception that increased objectivity is essentially equivalent to heightened omniscience in filmic narration. In terms of our knowledge of the protagonists' experiences, many instances of external focalization in Yang's films imply just as much subjectivity, ambiguity and uncertainty as those of internal focalization, regardless of the extent to which they might or might not provide us with a higher degree of visual omniscience than is afforded to the characters themselves.

Second, because the camera obviously has the potential to present several characters existing on-screen at the same time, then focalization is also ambiguous in its capacity to provide us with greater insight on two or more different tracts of (figurative) internal focalization, simultaneously. As a result, our ability to gain greater insight on the perceptual and psychological experiences of the focalized characters is frequently undermined by our necessity to concentrate on distinct elements of sight and sound that simultaneously provide different pieces of information on their individual experiences. Hence, I fail to see how the ability of the camera to focalize multiple figures and objects at the same time necessarily provides us with a greater sense of objectivity or omniscience, strictly in terms of our knowledge of character based subjectivity – in essence, seeing more is not always equivalent to knowing more. In this way, techniques of external focalization can be just as effective as those of internal focalization in bringing the audience closer to the hearts and minds of characters and, therefore, the only quality that might truly distinguish between these processes rests upon whether the experiences of a character are being depicted figuratively or literally through the camera frame.

Of course, some might argue that a literal manifestation of a character's perceptual and/or mental states should allow us to objectify the subjective much more so than what is implied through the surface appearances of the objects, including the actors themselves, that are contained (and auto-focalized) within the *mise-en-scene* that is captured through the external perspective of the camera. However, it must be acknowledged that even instances of internal focalization are only rough approximations

that are intended to represent the perceptual or psychological experiences of the characters and, therefore, describing these as being somehow literal is altogether misleading. If anything, external and internal focalization might only be distinguished according to how explicit or implicit a rendering of character based subjectivity might be, but, even then, such a determination could only be formed on the basis of inferences that we draw from the often abstract textual cues that are deployed supposedly to indicate shifts in levels of focalization. However, our examination of several scenes from *Yi Yi* reveals that changes from external to internal levels of focalization, or vice-versa, can be so seamless that is often difficult, if not impossible, to determine exactly when such transitions might truly begin or end, which is, above all, evidenced by the film's problematic usage of eyeline matches as well as its confounding dream sequence. Hence, the spatial distinctions that are implied through the external and internal subcategories of focalization are, by themselves, insufficient to allow us to extrapolate the full range of meanings that might be reflected in films, especially in those that present relatively unconventional approaches to plot structuring, character development and thematization.

By contrast, our case studies illustrate how auto-focalization can allow us to reduce (but not eliminate), the haze of ambiguity that surrounds Deleyto's sub-typologies by emphasizing the capacity for the figures and objects of mise-en-scene to bring us closer to the psychology of characters through the specific meanings that are represented by the visual qualities of their surface appearances, regardless of the spatial position that is occupied by the camera. Auto-focalization truly permits us to view externally focalized shots as being somehow internal, without having to rely on these typological distinctions to achieve such an affect, thereby avoiding the paradoxical implications that are characteristic of Deleyto's model and its terminology. In part, the success of the theory rests upon its ability to encourage us to focus more on the information that is conveyed through the body language of characters, an element of which seems to be situated outside of the categorical scope of the terms external, internal and ambiguous focalization within Deleyto's discussion. In Chapter II, we devoted much attention to the meanings that are conveyed through the often sublime forms of body language achieved by the talented actors of Yang's films, information of which is often crucial to enhancing our understanding of the characters' thoughts and emotions particularly because these works contain so many long takes without the disclosure of much significant dialogue. At the

same time, auto-focalization also serves well to highlight the potential for material objects and environmental conditions to be highly reflective of a character's mood, personality, thoughts, beliefs and idiosyncrasies, regardless of, first, whether the position of the camera indicates that focalization is external, internal or ambiguous; and, second, whether or not he/she is aware of the presence of such items or conditions in his/her surroundings, in spite of what Branigan claims. Our preceding discussion of the functions that are performed by visual obstructions (e.g. windowpanes), props, reflections and projections in Yang's films, is highly illustrative of this dimension of auto-focalization, so much so that elements of *mise-en-scene* might be far more important to enhancing our understanding of character based subjectivity rather than the spatial positions or angles occupied by the camera, at least, in these types of films.

At the same time, our discussions of both films indicate that individual shots should not be analysed outside of the editing sequences that surround them, nor should they be interpreted without due consideration of the additional information that is revealed through a film's approach to dialogue, plot development and thematization. If we had based our analysis solely on the visual features of still shots, we surely would not have been able to arrive at such a rich understanding of the psychological experiences of the characters in Yang's films, nor would we be able to see how the layers of characterization, narration and thematic development often parallel one another in such remarkable ways. As such, auto-focalized images appear to represent visual anchors that reinforce, emphasize and even nuance the information (on characters and themes) that is disclosed through specific instances of dialogue and plot development that take place in other portions of a film narrative. In addition, it would be fallacious to use auto-focalization by itself as a means to uncover the nature of character based perspective, consciousness and subjectivity without due consideration of the various tracts of narration, whether these might be character bound or otherwise, that are revealed in motion pictures. Not only does this indicate that Miguel and Mainar appear to be overconfident in claiming that auto-focalization enables us to view shots outside of their syntagmatic context, but reveals that there is indeed much value in Deleuto's suggestion that ambiguous focalization seems to reflect a considerable overlap in the functions between narrators and character-focalizers, in spite of the objections that many narratologists have raised towards such a claim. If this is the case, then it is clear that

Bal's distinction between the layers of story and text does not always hold true, at least, in terms of where we can situate characters and narrators, respectively, within the narrative levels of films. As such, it might be necessary to develop new forms of categorization and terminology to account for this discrepancy, but, unfortunately, such a task would go well beyond the scope of this thesis.

In part, the preceding examination of the ambiguous forms of narration and characterization that are achieved through Yang's unusual approaches to eyeline matches and continuity editing, particularly in their capacity to create tensions between aspects of sight and sound, should reveal, strictly on the basis of textual evidence alone, that narrating functions can revolve principally around the perception and consciousness of a character as opposed to the intrusion of an effaced agent (i.e. an extra-diegetic narrator or implied author) who is external to the time and place of a story world. That is not to suggest that the intrusion of an external source of narration is altogether absent, as specific textual markers, most notably cuts, obviously cannot stem from the characters themselves during these kinds of editing sequences. Ultimately, these are essential in indicating a transition from scene to scene, which can only be regarded as an extension of an extra-diegetic narrator, that is if we do not go beyond the boundaries of the film text itself as to consider the role of the real-life film maker. Nevertheless, the extra-diegetic intervention of the cut can only become signified when it is juxtaposed with the specific implications of the content that is presented in the shots (i.e. through *mise-en-scène*) that come before and after its manifestation. As such, it would be entirely unsound to believe that the aspects of *mise-en-scène* that contribute to the development of a film story are ultimately subsumed to the functions of editing techniques, simply because they cannot exist in isolation from one another in contributing to this broader process.

That aside, because many of these editing sequences provide an abundance of information on the thoughts and feelings of individuals through reaction shots and eyeline matches, the viewer cannot help but feel that he/she has been granted a privileged access to the subjective realms of the characters without any form of substantial mediation on behalf of an external agent of narration, a position of which appears to be in line with that of Bordwell and Branigan in their extensive research on the spectator's cognitive

interpretation of cinema.¹ This pattern is even reflected during those moments of intervention when out-of-place textual codes such as inter-titles or other forms of abstract imagery are abruptly deployed to emphasize certain thematic considerations, since, as previously demonstrated, the characters themselves are often fully aware of the information that is provided by such intrusions prior to their occurrence. One could even go as far to argue that the characters are ultimately the creators of such knowledge and, as such, these kinds of interventions merely perform emphatic functions in drawing our attention exclusively to the forms of characterization and thematization that are achieved through their inscription onto the film text. Here, we can see, once again, how characters are able to contribute to processes of narration and, therefore, it would be fallacious to situate them exclusively at the story layer, if we assume, in accordance with Bal, that the agents of narration can only exist at the textual layer. Thus, it seems that the components and functions of story and text can operate on the same level, at least, in relation to the cinematic medium.

Distinguishing between processes of focalization and narration hinges upon, above all, our ability to evaluate whether or not the film text has provided us with any substantial forms of commentary that are not available to the characters themselves, a question of which revolves largely around the issues of omniscience that we have just discussed. Many of the scenes that were examined from these films are quite exemplary in demonstrating the potential difficulty that we might face in attempting to make such a determination with any measure of confidence. In our analysis of surface reflections in *Yi Yi*, we discussed how Min-Min was not aware of the symbolic implications of the perspective that was framed by the mirror situated behind her during her emotional breakdown and given that she was not privy to such knowledge we could describe this specific approach to mise-en-scene as performing a function of narration. If this is the case, then we must determine whether the identity that lies behind the perspective of the camera belongs to a character or, alternatively, an extra-diegetic narrator. However, recall that we could not conclude with great certainty whether the shot was internally focalized

¹ For Bordwell's model on the cognitive interpretation of cinema, see his lengthy work *Narration in the Fiction Film*. For Branigan's most thorough discussion of the subject, consult his book *Narrative Comprehension and Film*.

by NJ or externally focalized by an effaced source of narration given that the spatial position of the camera appeared to be close to, but perhaps not identical to, that which was occupied by NJ. Assuming that the shot was indeed internally focalized through the eyes of Min-Min's husband, then we could certainly view him as simultaneously performing a twofold role as an internal focalizer and a narrator particularly because, as previously argued, he was, in fact, well aware of the issues of narrow mindedness and limited perspective that were symbolized by the mirror reflection. Furthermore, we attempted to tackle very similar questions in our discussion of the role that projections played in contributing to Yang-Yang's coming-of-age experience and determined that the young boy was, at least, somewhat aware of the implications that were posed by the colourful imagery and dramatic sounds of the documentary film that were apparently focalized through his perceptual faculties.

We also encountered a great deal of ambiguity when we attempted to evaluate the role of inter-titles in *A Confucian Confusion*, particularly during our account of the philosophical monologue that was undertaken by Xiaoming at the end of that film. What complicated our ability to isolate different identities and modes of narration in that sequence centred on the fact that prior to the intervention of the inter-title, Xiaoming had already disclosed information that was directly relevant to its content and, therefore, he evidenced a degree of awareness that was equivalent to that which was subsequently reflected by the textual device itself. That is not to suggest that the inter-title serves as an image that is internally focalized by Xiaoming himself since the sequence does not contain any blatant textual markers that would indicate that a shift in levels of focalization had really occurred. Instead, I am asserting that Xiaoming appears to be the primary agent of narration because the information that becomes highlighted by the inter-title originates ultimately from his thought process and speech act in light of the causal relationships that are evidenced by the shot sequence. This viewpoint becomes all the more convincing if we consider that Xiaoming verbalizes the words that are displayed on the inter-title and, therefore, functions as a voice-over narrator during its manifestation.

Similarly, some instances of auto-focalization indirectly attribute a degree of narrating agency to particular characters by reflecting information that enhances our understanding of their personalities, moods and motives, but only on the condition that the characters themselves are aware that such qualities exist within their hearts and

minds. For example, we could argue that since Yang-Yang's camera serves well to auto-focalize his philosophical interests, all of which are obviously situated at the forefront of his mind throughout most of the film, then it would not be a stretch to assert that the device performs a function of narration that it is ultimately rooted within his own private experience of intellectual, artistic and moral development. Since Yang-Yang is well-aware of what his possession and application of the camera truly represents, and given that the film does not offer any additional, extra-diegetic forms of commentary that might significantly counterpoint and undermine the nature of its symbolic implications, then we might rightfully attribute a considerable degree of narrating agency to his role in the film. Even if we dismiss the possibility that Yang-Yang might serve as a narrator in this way, we would still have to acknowledge that what is characterized (or auto-focalized) about the young child by his camera happens to be congruous with the forms of thematic meta-narration that are simultaneously embodied by it and, in turn, this should compel us to accept, at the very least, that this aspect of the film narrative problematizes the traditional distinction between characters and narrators by allowing their functions to overlap and coincide.

By contrast, it would be far more difficult to draw similar conclusions on the roles that various technological props play in expanding our knowledge of some of the protagonists in *A Confucian Confusion*, given that those characters do not explicitly reflect the high degree of awareness and self-reflexivity that was embodied by Yang-Yang. For example, it is doubtful that Qiqi truly realizes that she consistently loses her (otherwise) strong sense of self-composure whenever she happens to misplace her mobile phone, nor is it likely that Molly is aware of how conniving and powerful she becomes whenever she gets behind the wheel of her sports car, although she does seem to exhibit a higher degree of humility by the end of the film. In all likelihood, only the viewer can recognize these patterns of behaviour through a consideration of the entire film narrative, its overall plot structure and its thematic concerns, particularly those that reflect criticisms towards some aspects of technological consumerism in contemporary society. In light of this, auto-focalization can, at times, reveal forms of narration that are exclusively implied by an agent that is external to the story world in order to provide supplemental commentary to the viewer, thereby granting him/her with a level of privileged insight that cannot be realized by the characters themselves. I believe that this

pattern is, above all, reflected by the audience's ability to draw a multiplicity of cogent parallels between the complimentary story lines that surround the characters of both *A Confucian Confusion* and *Yi Yi*, a process of which can only come to fruition upon viewing these film narratives in their entirety.

This point is best illustrated by comparing the levels of awareness that are evidenced by the characters Ota, Yang-Yang, NJ, Grandma and Ting-Ting in *Yi Yi*. As previously argued, Ota represents a degree of wisdom and omniscience that could be viewed as the logical end of the artistic and philosophical voyage that Yang-Yang embarks upon for the first time in his life. The outlooks of these characters could only be distinguished according to the amounts of life experience that each one of them has accumulated: whereas Yang-Yang is just beginning to use an artistic medium to gain new insight, Ota has already spent a lifetime doing so and, as a result, he is able to reflect a level of awareness, knowledge and confidence that could not be achieved by the young boy at this early stage in his life. Similarly, one could argue that Ota and Yang-Yang reflect degrees of omniscience that cannot be achieved by NJ until the end of the film when he engages in what are arguably his most substantial interactions with those characters – these take place, first, during his final dinner meeting with the Ota and, second, when he returns to Taipei and sees Yang-Yang showing his peculiar photos to A-Di. Finally, Ting-Ting can only achieve amelioration when she confronts her grandmother in the dream sequence and realizes that the old woman's strong sense of contentment and serenity indicate that all of her worries are petty in comparison to all the positive things that should be valued in her life.

In all of these cases, there is a consistent pattern of meta-narration whereby some characters can only overcome their problems and step outside of their limited viewpoints by learning from others through authentic forms of communication and openness. Thus, the film's highest level of meta-narration does not simply point out the need for us to resolve our problems by adopting the ideals of open mindedness and mutual understanding, but emphasizes that the experience that we must undertake to achieve such a lofty goal is significant in and of itself - in other words, the means are just as important as the ends, themselves, within the process of personal development that is advocated by this film. We would not be able to detect this thematic consideration without being able to observe the remarkable similarities that exist among the

relationships of these protagonists, which could only be achieved by digesting the narrative in its entirety. Of course, only the viewer is able to take part in this privilege, unlike the characters who could not possibly be aware of what one another is doing throughout all moments of the film, and it is due to their lack of omniscience, relatively speaking, that they are unable to contribute to this aspect of meta-narration. While some of the characters might be able to appreciate the arduous experiences that they had undertaken to achieve some degrees of personal satisfaction and relief, the pronounced tone of ambivalence that characterizes the closure of the film indicates that their journeys had never really ended in the first place, and that these would continue well into their post-filmic future.

Ultimately, this may represent the only way in which narrators and characters along with the extra-/intra-diegetic realms can remain truly distinct within the medium of film. Whether we choose to call this highest level of the narrative a reflection of narration, meta-narration, implied authorship or otherwise, the crucial point is that this appears to be the only manifestation of a source of knowledge that is not explicitly available to the characters themselves. That is not to suggest that we have, once and for all, located an epistemological boundary that is readily identifiable, as the film does not reflect any overt textual cues that would blatantly push us towards detecting all of the remarkable similarities that exist amongst the characters' experiences, a process of which would be essential to allow us to realize the previously mentioned theme. However, despite my objections to some aspects of Branigan's thinking, I do believe that there is much value in his observation that, "Omniscience does not mean that the reader finally knows all, but merely refers to the reader's toleration of a boundary or *limit* to what finally can be known *in* the text." Hence, as readers or viewers we are usually compelled to essentialize what we believe is the most fundamental of meanings contained within a narrative text – while we might not be able to feel entirely confident about the conclusions that we form due to a lack of straight forward empirical evidence, we must, nonetheless, locate a point at which we can ultimately anchor the broadest implications of the text via inferences that can only be drawn through an evaluation and comparison of the sum total of its components.

There is no doubt that, upon viewing *Yi Yi* in its entirety, we are presented with a series of complimentary sub-plots that reflect numerous parallels, and given that none of

these are contradicted substantially by any other element of the film, I fail to see how one could arrive at a conclusion that would be markedly different from that which has been proposed, here. Granted, one could argue that the story of A-Di might represent an attempt to go against the thematic grain of the narrative, given that he manages to achieve a form of amelioration without realizing the extent to which his own patterns of selfishness and narcissism had contributed to his dire problems. Yet, throughout the film, we can see how his pervasive senses of apathy, guilt and self-loathing spiral out of control, particularly when he attempts to commit suicide in one disturbing scene. Thus, one cannot help but feel that A-Di will continue to encounter the same kinds of problems and maintain the same patterns of destructive behaviour, regardless of the amelioration that he achieves at the end of the film. That aside, if we consider that his redemption is grounded strictly in an unexpected financial windfall that is secured under extremely dubious circumstances (i.e. theft), then one might suspect that his personal victory is purely superficial and ephemeral. Not surprisingly, the only plausible solution to his problems lies within the moral message that is suggested, most notably, by Yang-Yang and Ota – that is he must be willing to open up his heart and mind to the viewpoints of others, if he truly wishes to escape the shackles of his own self-centred behaviour.

In closing, it is altogether possible, if not likely, that the films of Edward Yang reveal only some of the advantages and disadvantages of using focalization models as a means to assess point of view and narration in film. As such, I strongly suspect that other cinematic works, particularly those that reflect a great deal of ambiguity and self-reflexivity, might allow us to realize additional dimensions of focalization theory that have not been considered in this investigation. An examination of alternative case studies could reflect new insight on processes of focalization that might, in turn, have significant implications on our understanding of other levels of a film narrative, most notably in regards to narration and thematization. In our present era, a handful of contemporary film makers continue to push the envelope by producing innovative works that attempt to challenge many of the conventions that are associated with the cinematic medium. By doing so, it is possible that they are not only trying to redefine the standards of film, but those of the field of narratology as well and, thus, I believe that it would be fruitful for scholars to engage in further efforts to test the strengths and weaknesses of narratological concepts by applying them to a wide variety of case studies. Ultimately, the study of

narrative structures can provide us with important clues that might guide us in our ongoing quest to identify the relationships that govern the mechanisms of knowledge construction. Within these efforts, there is much more at stake than just a need to satisfy our thirst for a more accurate understanding of the dynamics that are reflected by different narrative mediums, for such an undertaking can also endow us with a richer understanding of the construction of historical texts or even the stories of our own lives.

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